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The importance of participation for Christian children’s spiritual education

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While many Christians would agree that the spiritual nurture of children is essential to Christian family life, the topic of children has been discussed relatively little in the history of Christian theological thought (Bunge 2001, 3–4). It has not been wholly neglected – the proper upbringing of children has been mentioned by theologians dating back to Patristic times (Harrison 2000, 481) – but there is still the impression that childhood has not been treated very seriously as a significant part of the Christian faith. In recent decades, scholars have attempted to take a fresh look at the meaning of childhood and the significance of children to theology. Many of these scholars draw inspiration from Jesus’ teachings on children, such as ““Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”” (Luke 18:16–17) (see Gundry-Volf 2000, 469; Mountain 2011, 264). These scholars posit new ways both to view children as intrinsically valuable in their own right and to raise children in a world that is in many ways becoming increasingly difficult for both Christian believers and children (DeVries 2001, 161–62).

Contemporary times pose their own challenges to the raising of Christian children which scholars and theologians are forced to confront. Children are increasingly threatened by market pressures that fundamentally change much of the way they interact with the

world. This idea of ‘the child as consumer’ creates relationships based on ‘exchange’ and ‘choice’, which can make relationships between children and adults transactional, alienating and/or exploitative. When such ideas become ingrained in Christian spiritual education – one of the key components of the overall spiritual nurture provided in a child’s lifetime – they can undermine the goal of establishing a child’s spiritual foundation. This paper instead emphasizes the need for spiritual education to be based on a model of *participation* in which the principal focus is inviting children to live an active Christian life with the adults in their faith community. In arguing for the importance of such a ‘learning-by-doing’ approach, this paper will build a theological basis for participation as a means to knowledge and spiritual growth, engage with some developmental psychology researchers to examine children’s inherent potential for participatory activities, and conclude by exploring possible methods and practices that can bring participatory spiritual education into church communities and families.



Challenges for childhood nurture in contemporary times

Early Christian writers warned parents about exposing children to vulgar entertainment and other harmful influences (Harrison 2000, 493), and one could say that almost two millennia later, little has changed. Adults today fear that the modern economic and media climate is not only exposing children to immoral role models and influences, it is shaping the way in which children react to their worlds with trends like materialism and individualism (Charry 2000, 451–52). This leads to children developing a ‘consumer orientation’ at a young age with a disposition to react to economic pressures and lacking the ability to distinguish content from advertising (Osmer 2000, 517).

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, explores this idea of ‘child as consumer’ in his book *Lost Icons* (2000). Williams suggests that ‘we live in an environment in which the definition of the child as a choosing and consuming subject undermines the whole enterprise of nurture’ (22). For Williams, treating children in such a way makes them economic subjects with choices in the marketplace

and world. However, economic choices often carry heavy risks and/or ramifications, which adults supposedly understand, but which children have not yet had the life experience to comprehend and fully consider (23). This leads to exploitation of children, feelings of confusion and frustration among youth, and damaging decisions involving children who are being treated like adults prematurely (23–24). Williams argues that childhood should be a time when children can learn to make these kinds of decisions without the pressure of adult commitment, but our economic system forces children into consuming roles too early (27).

This consumer environment is especially problematic for the spiritual nurture of children, as choices made about faith, worship, and morals are arguably weightier than any other choices. While religious conversion cannot be compelled, it would be irresponsible to bring children to active choices in matters of spirituality without communicating the importance and consequences of those actions. To treat children growing in faith as consumers who are ‘advertised’ to would be to ‘collude’ (Williams 2000, 22) with a larger system of pressure and exploitation of children (*ibid.*, 22–23). One of the primary aims of spiritual nurture and education, therefore, should be to guide children through the process of learning how to make these choices and to understand the consequences (*ibid.*, 47–48). Spiritual education can thus provide children with a different framework – one based on Christian living – for understanding their lives and choices than the market-centred one propagated to them by contemporary culture (Charry 2000, 452).

Hence, a problem arises when one views spiritual education in similarly economic terms. If the educational or nurture process is carried out as a system of exchange – the adult as producer and the child as consumer – it can have a damaging effect on the child, as it can lead to similar confusion and frustration. Professional child and youth care workers have documented how children can respond negatively to child intervention approaches that view the process as an exchange, such as reward/punishment for certain types of behaviour or even the input of resources (e.g. youth workers’ effort, skills, care) in expecting an ‘output’ of some kind (e.g. better social skills, fixing life issues) from the child (Scott and Magnuson 2006, 450–51). Children can

feel alienated from the adult workers, start to view their relationships with the adults as limited to whatever the ‘exchange’ is, or see their relationships as exploitative in similar ways to past traumas in their lives (ibid.). In such cases, it is important to spiritually nurture the children in ways that do not easily imply an exchange or transaction (ibid., 451).

The analysis above shows that it is problematic to view spiritual education as an exchange of inputs and outputs, a transaction of actions, or as a product given to a child who consumes it. Thus, if the goal is living Christian faith, economic models of education will likely not suffice. Rather, it will be argued that spiritual education should properly be understood as the *participation* of children, with the adults, in the life of the faith. Here, an understanding of participation as a theological concept can help inform an educational approach that treats learning and knowledge as results of proper action, rather than the reverse.



Participation as a theological concept

In theological language, participation can be described as ‘a form of knowledge that comes by faith and service to God’ (Beeley 2008, 229). More broadly, it is the active involvement of a person in the Christian life, or more essentially the life of God. In this sense, participation was seen by many early Christian theologians in salvific terms – for example, the Patristic theologian Gregory of Nazianzus viewed Christian salvation as ‘the transforming participation of the human person in the being and life of God’ (ibid., 116–17). This occurs first through Christ’s incarnation, by which He unites the human nature and enables true communion with God (ibid., 138); then through the work and grace of the Holy Spirit in bringing Christians into participation in Christ’s life (ibid., 178); and finally by our participating in His life, death and resurrection, by means of our baptism, our meditation on His works, and our imitation of Him (ibid., 150). However, for Gregory, participation is more than just doing the appropriate rites and imitating Christ’s ethical behaviour; it also initiates a real growth and partaking of God’s nature, such that the believer is transformed towards their

own salvation (ibid., 119). The later theologian John of Damascus visualized participation in God as like ‘iron plunged in fire’: while not actually becoming fire, the iron does gain heat and light and so takes on the nature of fire ‘by union and burning and participation’ (St John of Damascus 2003, 33).

Intertwined with participation’s role in salvation is how crucial participation is to learning and acquiring knowledge of God – as previously mentioned, participation can be viewed as knowledge that comes from faith and service. In fact, participation was often seen by Patristic theologians as the only way to true knowledge of God (Nesteruk 2003, 42–43). Theology was not seen as the process of abstracting truths about the divine, or rationally deducing ideas about God, but as the lived experience of participating and communing with God (ibid., 42). In the glossary of the first English translation of *The Philokalia*, a collection of texts by Christian theologians and monastics spanning several centuries, theology is defined as ‘active and conscious participation in or perception of the realities of the divine world – in other words, the realization of spiritual knowledge’ (Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware 1979, 1:366). In this sense, Christian knowledge comes not through philosophizing, but through living.

Alexander Schmemman, a Russian theologian and notable critic of secularity and postmodernity, characterizes this distinction as ‘knowledge about’ versus ‘knowledge of’. ‘Knowledge about’ is rational and discursive, but it cannot truly exist without having ‘knowledge of’ first, which comes from living and participating in God’s epiphanies and revelations (Schmemman 1973, 141–42). For Schmemman, much of modern theology has been reduced to ‘knowledge about’, which separates it from the very object – God – which enables its existence (ibid., 141).

Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance similarly expounds on this notion of participatory knowledge by arguing that theological knowledge cannot be divorced from what he calls a ‘dialogical relation’ between us and God, nor can it be abstracted from this relationship without becoming false (Torrance 1969, 39). Torrance explains:

Thus theological knowledge is not reflection upon our rational experience or even upon faith; it is reflection upon the object of faith in direct dialogical relation with that object, and therefore in faith – i.e. in conversation and communion with the living God who communicates Himself to us in acts of revelation and reconciliation and who requires of us an answering relation in receiving, acknowledging, understanding, and *in active personal participation in the relationship He establishes between us*. (Ibid., emphasis mine)

Here, Torrance argues for the inseparability of living faith and theological knowledge. This further emphasizes the need for what could be called a ‘learning-by-doing’ approach to the Christian faith. But it is also important to note that he calls theological knowledge ‘reflection’, meaning that deeper knowledge and understanding *proceeds from* our participating in God’s relationship with us, rather than *preceding* it. Approaches treating theological knowledge as *a priori* will fail to result in true understanding or growth in faith. In practice, this could imply that spiritual educational approaches in which children are made to learn all the ‘facts’ about the Christian faith – Bible stories, moral principles, theological doctrines, *etc* – and then are told to go out and live according to these facts are operating in the wrong way around. Rather, children should be invited, in both the church and the home, to join the adults in the many types of faithful activities and practices by which they can participate in God’s relationship with them. This would bring the children into the church community from a young age, but more so, it would begin laying a foundation of participatory knowledge. Upon this foundation, the aforementioned ‘facts’ can acquire genuine meaning through the children’s experience.

By helping children participate in faith from an early age, adults can avoid an alienating and demanding ‘exchange’ approach to spiritual education and instead nurture children’s faith through living relationships. This style of education would also help the adults, as they too would be actively participating and growing along with the children. In fact, children could be strong examples in showing adults

how to learn by doing, instead of by abstracting or consuming. The field of developmental psychology has long explored the extent to which children have a natural propensity for experiential learning, and as such, insights from prominent researchers in the field can be useful in discussing whether participation can play a meaningful role in nurturing children.



Participation in childhood development

In the previous section, it was argued that participation is essential for religious knowledge and growth, and thus it should be the basis for spiritual education. A natural response to this proposal would be to question whether children, especially young ones, would be capable of engaging in such an educational process. However, a participatory model of spiritual education may actually align with a child's natural proclivities and strengths. And indeed, several prominent psychologists have suggested that young children learn best by doing, rather than by consuming or abstracting.

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist who has been regarded as the most influential developmental psychologist of the twentieth century, proposed a developmental theory known as *constructivism*, so called because it proposes that a child constructs ways of learning and thinking about the world (Harris and Westermann 2015, 28). Piaget argued that learning in young children was not a passive process – rather, children learned best when they took an active role in the development process, creating systems of thinking and knowledge from their own experiences (*ibid.*). For Piaget, only by having new experiences can children accommodate and assimilate new information into their knowledge structures (*ibid.*, 29). Piaget's work has been challenged and revised by researchers in recent decades, but many psychologists still hold to the core ideas of his constructivist theory (*ibid.*, 30). In fact, one of the most prominent criticisms of his work was that he underestimated the learning ability of young children, and evidence of different types of active learning can be found in children from earlier ages than he initially believed possible (*ibid.*, 29–30). In this light, inviting children to participate in their spiritual education aligns

with their natural propensities for acquiring knowledge by active experience.

Other prominent developmental psychologists have explored different aspects of childhood learning – for example, Lev Vygotsky, an influential Russian psychologist, argued for the importance of social interactions and engagement in the development process (ibid., 31). Like Piaget, he also claimed that children are active in their development, but he also emphasized that they must engage with peers, adults and the culture around them (Takaya 2015, 884). Most notably, Vygotsky argued that children can perform tasks and achieve goals beyond their current abilities if encouraged and helped by a teacher. This means that what may seem difficult or impossible for children to do on their own could actually be achievable if they do it in concert with adults (Harris and Westermann 2015, 31). The American psychologist Jerome Bruner built on these ideas to argue that children’s development is driven by the people and culture around them, and that it is ‘a process of transformation rather than a mere accumulation of information’ (Takaya 2015, 882). Here we see the importance of the children’s relationships, whether with parents, teachers, or friends, in education; a participatory model of spiritual education would ensure that all groups involved were bolstering each other’s efforts towards the same goals.

A notable instance of a scientist who applied developmental research to spiritual education is the Italian physician Maria Montessori. The well-known Montessori Method, while not necessarily a religious curriculum, was developed and applied by Montessori with religious instruction in mind (Hyde 2011, 342). A key foundation of the Montessori Method is that children have a natural preference to work, which is defined as ‘any activity which involves the child’s whole personality and has as its unconscious aim the construction of personality’ (ibid., 343–44). For Montessori, children work to grow, to perfect themselves, and to satisfy the whole of their beings (ibid.). By this reasoning, children naturally choose tasks which are active, experiential and constructive. A participatory approach to spiritual education would be all three of these and would certainly be focussed on the child’s whole being.

However, one could ask whether the practices and ideas in spiritual education would be so natural for children to assimilate. After all, while engaging in rudimentary educational practices seems basic, participating in the life of Jesus may seem conceptually abstract. Yet children often respond to biblical stories and characters by relating them to their own experiences (Marty 2007, 122–23). The child psychiatrist Robert Coles, in his observational work *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990), found that many children identified with Jesus rather naturally, especially with His coming as a child. For these children, Jesus was not an abstract character, but a personal guide with an important mission that He carried out for them (209). In this sense, children see Jesus not only as an interesting character, but a guiding light in Whose mission they can participate as well. In a sermon on Christmas, Schmemman argues that children have a natural capacity for wonder, trust and love that makes them far more able to experience the ‘deep mystery of the world’ (Schmemman 1994, 53), and thus to partake in the joy of Christmas (ibid., 52–53). In this sense, religious themes and activities are far from outside the bounds of a child’s understanding – in fact, children may be even more sympathetic to them than adults.

Many more examples could be cited to show why children would be naturally attuned to a participatory approach to spiritual education. But what would the particulars of such an approach look like in practice? The next section will examine some ideas for participatory Christian educational activities, look at practical approaches already being implemented in churches today, and explore further thoughts and discussions on the matter.



Towards a participatory spiritual education

Regardless of where spiritual education takes place – in the home, in Sunday School, in church youth meetings, *etc* – a participatory approach can be implemented to engage the children in a living faithful experience, rather than just an accumulation of information. But the primary source of spiritual education is worship, and thus it is imperative for spiritual nurture that children are actively

involved in worship at their church services and elsewhere. Iris Cully, a theologian of Christian education, claims that ‘Anyone who participates in a service of worship is learning about God and at the same time expressing relationship to God’ (Cully 1980, 117). From the previous discussion, it can be argued that worship leads even more to knowledge *of* God and a deepening of the relationship between Him and us.

Cully argues that children grow in faith through worship, and that prayer and participation in the Lord’s Supper are key to children experiencing their relationship with God and with the church community (ibid., 117–20). She advocates for the use of symbols in worship and education, since even if children do not understand the theological meaning of symbolic actions in worship, the symbols give them a point of reference for understanding at least some aspect of it. Then, over time, the repeated use of the symbol allows the meaning of the worship to be enriched as the child grows (ibid., 149). Schmemman argues that symbols are essential for participatory knowledge in theological concepts that are otherwise indescribable: ‘The symbol is means of knowledge of that which cannot be known otherwise, for knowledge here depends on participation – the living encounter with and entrance into that “epiphany” of reality which the symbol is’ (Schmemman 1973, 141). This is crucial to his understanding of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist – they enable a participatory knowledge of divine realities through symbolic worship (ibid., 142). Active and participatory worship is therefore the primary way in which children can begin to learn and grow in their faith.

Outside of worship, many religious educators have devised curricula for children’s spiritual education that emphasize active involvement and experience. One example is Sofia Cavalletti’s *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, which adapts the Montessori Method for catechetical spiritual education. Described as ‘an ongoing exploration into the gospel life’ (Searle 1992, 12), the programme gives children a space (called ‘the atrium’) in which they can actively and in a sensory-driven way develop personal meaning of the Christian faith from their experiences (Hyde 2011, 343). Another approach inspired by Montessori, but with a different emphasis, is

Jerome Berryman's *Godly Play*. Berryman argues for a greater role of play in children's spiritual education, claiming that it is a deep and personal immersion in creativity and play that helps children confront issues in their lives and gain deeper knowledge (Hyde 2011, 343–46). For Berryman, recent evidence that play has is biologically important in children's development and is integral to their health makes it essential for consideration by theologians (Berryman 2009, 192). And indeed, since certain kinds of play are considered innate in children (Lillard, Pinkham, and Smith 2011, 285) and also are active, immersive, and often symbolic (*ibid.*, 285), there is reason to suggest that child's play could be a useful phenomenon to explore in spiritual education methods.

Ultimately though, the strongest kind of participatory education comes from living a life 'by faith and service to God' (Beeley 2008, 229). Worship and service to the church are children's best teachers, and they also bring children deeper into the life of the church itself. As Cully notes, 'Children feel most completely part of a parish when there are specific ways in which they can contribute to its life' (Cully 1980, 124). Those contributions could manifest themselves in many forms: the children doing a certain task during the worship service, helping at church activities during the week, making presents for the church's sick and needy, and so on. What matters most is that the children participate in the life of the church, so they can begin to actively build their experiential knowledge of the Christian faith and of their own relationships with God.



Conclusion

Jesus commanded that children should not be kept away from Him, but be brought to Him, for to them belongs His kingdom (Luke 18:16). For proponents of spiritual education, the way to follow this example is not simply to tell children about Jesus, but to bring them to Him. By focussing on participation as a means to theological knowledge and spiritual nurture, parents and religious teachers can help build a foundation of living faith for their children from a young age. Children are natural learners, and they learn best by doing, especially

when doing things with adults. Rather than teach them information or conduct their spiritual education with a ‘give and receive’ mentality, spiritual nurturers should invite children to participate with adults in Christian living. This will not only establish the children in their faith, but also strengthen the faith of the adults and the whole church community in turn.

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