

CHILDREN AS THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC: IS THERE A NEW EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK EMERGING?

1. INTRODUCTION

A gross understatement is to speak of the neglect of children in theology in general and Missiology in particular. As a matter of fact, children are quite conspicuous in their absence in the theology we write even when such theology is purportedly aimed at the entire human race or the whole church. My paper is aimed not so much at increasing the volume of theology by factoring children into it or by making children part of our theological education, for example. The main purpose of the presentation is to advance the following argument: that children are forcing a new theological hermeneutic on us which is beginning to make some wonder whether we are not confronted with a new epistemological break. Are children challenging theology and the church to rethink, or should it rather be, to re-enact or re-do the manner in which we arrive at theological and ecclesiological knowledge? In the same manner that the poor in their struggles against oppressive economic systems, women in their battles against de-womanising patriarchy and mother earth in her cry against the object-subject scheme of reality created by human beings for the plundering of nature, have challenged theology and the church to develop new theories of knowledge?

To be clear, the question of the paper is not whether adults care for or teach (or venerate) children (White 2011:5), but rather whether they begin to understand that from the perspective of children there is an entirely different way of knowing the Kingdom or reign of God. The question of the paper is consequently not about the sharpening and the improvement of the Sunday school, the children's guild, the children's brigade and the children's service once a quarter or more frequently. No, it goes deeper and has to do with what Naka (in White 2011: 148) hints as the "fruitful hermeneutical clue" and what Werner (2011:80) more pertinently calls "a fundamental missiological priority principle". In the continent of Africa with its prevailing patriarchal cultural patterns this is indeed quite a challenge as the following example might illustrate. Much as the General Synod of a particular denomination has resolved almost a decade ago that children could be served with the Holy Communion on condition that a proper pastoral process is followed with families who wish that their children partake of the table of the Lord, there is still fierce resistance in many a congregation. Once again, the question of the paper presented here is not merely whether children are to join adults around the communion table, but whether the self-same adults are ready for a radical reorientation where children become the interpretive key for what happens in the ministry of the church.

2. ORGANISATION

Having stated the problem that passes the revue in the paper somewhat, i.e. having clarified the question of the study somewhat, I shall now proceed to indicate the manner in which the paper is organised. First, a cursory look is taken at instances of

reorientation in mission circles with particular reference to Edinburgh 2010 and what has become known as the 4/14 Window or movement. Second, the notion of children as theological hermeneutic is induced as more or less the main thrust or thesis of the paper. Third, based on the centralisation of children in church and theology, the question is posed whether this constitutes a new epistemological break or just an extension to or a prolonging of the rupture that came about in theology with the emergence of modes of liberation theology and eco-theology. Fourth, does this have the potential to bring about a transformation of Missiology as an academic discipline? Is this constituting an authentic postmodern Missiology?

3. A REORIENTATION IN MISSION CIRCLES

One issue that has been emerging quite strongly in mission circles the past decade or so, is the negligence about children and the virtual absence of children from theology in general and Missiology as a theological discipline in particular. This portion of the paper is aimed at introducing two specific examples of a reorientation that might not only draw greater attention to children, but trigger an epistemological break.

3.1 EDINBURGH 2010

The centenary of the famous Edinburgh 1910 mission conference was celebrated in Edinburgh, Scotland from 2-6 June 2010. At the Edinburgh 2010 conference the corrective on the negligence about children and their virtual absence from mission and Missiology, took on different forms. In theme or commission 5 at Edinburgh 2010 on *Forms of Missionary Engagement*, for example, the issue of *the mission of children* was introduced. The formulation in itself hinted a significant shift from viewing children as objects of mission to seeing them as people *in mission* themselves (Kim and Anderson 2011:156). There was enthusiasm about the issue of children in mission, but also concern about the care of children, their potential for exploitation and a right recognition of childhood. The theological-missiological rationale for children in mission seemed to have been the recalling of how Jesus placed a child amongst his disciples and also the key roles in mission played by several children in the Bible. In the report of the Listening Group at Edinburgh, there is talk of “a new and refreshing concern” relating to “the role of children as a new energy for twenty first century mission” (Kim and Anderson 2011: 315). In brief therefore, Edinburgh 2010 hinted quite strongly, albeit it still in snippets and in a fragmentary fashion, that children were forcing a new mission hermeneutic upon us.

3.2 THE 4/14 WINDOW

Perhaps the strongest signal of a corrective emerging in mission circles, is the 4/14 movement where the gaze is on children of the ages 4 to 14 as a major constituency for mission and the transformation of the world. Analogous to his 10/40 window, Bush has constructed the 4/14 Window to draw attention to the importance of children of those particular ages as agents of mission and transformation in the

world. If global summits is anything to go by, the agency and centrality of children in mission is taken so seriously that the 4/14 movement has had major world summits in New York (2009), Nairobi (2010) and Singapore (2011).

3.3 MISSION AS PROPHECY

The shift in emphasis from adults in mission to children in mission could potentially give new impetus to the understanding of mission as prophecy. The 4/14 Window is strongly informed by the prophecy from Joel 2:28 which reads as follows in the New International Version:

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

There is an important dimension of prophecy that seems to be emerging in the 4/14 movement which is the envisioning of a reality that is qualitatively different, a re-description (Brueggemann) of the world that is closer to what God sees. In his proposal for *mission as prophecy* and in elaborating on the content of the prophetic message, Kirk (2006:157-160) writes about the promise of new beginnings, lamenting the fact that this dimension of the prophetic message is quite often overlooked. He deals of course with the other dimensions of prophecy, namely the condemnation of idolatry and the warning about the consequences of idolatry, but then puts emphasis on the “envisioning” dimension of prophecy. In simple terms the new beginnings are the sending of a true liberator who will deliver people from their foolish ways and who will restore to them genuine wisdom. A most important aspect of the renewal will be the outpouring of the Spirit and the establishment of justice.

It is hugely interesting to note, for example, that Vanhoozer (2003:12) in the compilation on *Postmodern Theology*, speaks of the “recovery of two neglected forms of religious discourse...the prophetic and the mystical”. A genuinely postmodern missiology and dare one say, a missiology informed by children as the mission hermeneutic, is a “dream missiology” that capacitates people to see something other than what obtains in the present world (Vanhoozer 2003:12). It comes therefore as no surprise that for the auctor intellectualis of the CTF, White the prophecy from Isaiah 11, is central to Child Theology. And in a very creative fashion he integrates prophecy and mission in his piece entitled *A little child will lead them- Rediscovering children at the heart of mission*. The interpretive moment is not only the brilliant prophetic vision, but more importantly the centrality of children in the Messianic Kingdom.

4. CHILDREN AS THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC

Up to now in the paper there were hints here and there of a serious new construct, namely children as theological hermeneutic, but no serious attempt has been made yet to work this out more elaborately. In proceeding now to a more extensive engagement with the notion, there are four issues in particular that will pass the

revue: margins as centre in mission, a call to conversion, mission in narrative mode and mission in creative tension.

4.1 MARGINS AS CENTRE IN MISSION

In theology in general and in Missiology in particular, a new hermeneutic has always arisen with the foregrounding of marginalised categories of people and issues. The theological-missiological notion of God's preferential option for the poor arose when attempts were made to look at political and socio-economic realities from the perspective of the poor. Greater understanding for the struggles of women against patriarchy, emerged when the gaze changed from looking at reality from the perspective of a male dominated and patriarchal world to an interpretation of the world from the perspective of women's experiences. In theology and in the church the greater sensitivity for the devastation of the earth by humans, arose from the foregrounding of mother earth as equally in need of justice as strongly suggested by the Confession of Accra(2004).

4.2 THE CHILD FOREGROUNDED AS A SIGN

One of the foremost proponents of the 4/14 movement, Brewster (2011:183-185) draws attention to the issue that the Bible is a book full of signs in his interpretation of the theological significance of children. The fundamental theological rationale for the notion of children as hermeneutic, is the offering of a child by Jesus as a sign of the kingdom of God (White 2011:55). However, the context in which this happens seems to be of paramount importance for a proper understanding of what Jesus was aiming at. The child is located centre stage by Jesus in a situation where his disciples were concerned about power, position and greatness. In an appropriation to the South African theological and ecclesial context one could say that the concern is about rewards for having participated in the struggle against apartheid in terms of coming as close as possible to the gravy pot. The only response from Jesus is to foreground a child as a sign of God's reign.

Different versions of the story are called into service to make the same point. Werner (2011:80) uses the story from Mark 9:36 for his contention that "children are a fundamental missiological priority principle". This is tautological language in a sense, aimed at making abundantly clear that in the encounter between Jesus and the children, the latter are drawn into the centre as an indispensable mark of his own ministry". White (2011:55) uses Matthew 18 as the basis for his assertion that the child is a sign of the reign of God. In his interpretation of the story from Matthew 18, White (ibid.: 55-56) cautions about vital aspects of the story that should not be overlooked. First, that we know nothing of the character of the child, not even whether the child was male or female. The caution here seems to be against an overhasty assumption about the disposition of the child. White will argue that any attempt at being very pious and politically correct in terms of attributing to the child particular qualities, is misplaced. In a real sense therefore, the child is the child and

simply for that reason, the child is identified by Jesus as a sign of the reign of God. And this is exactly what the second issue is about. To cite White himself:

...although the child is silent, the sign is not simply the child in the midst, standing in splendid isolation. The child has been placed by Jesus, and Jesus speaks about the child and explains how this little child is a sign of the Kingdom.

The third aspect raised by White is intriguingly important and points to the fact that Jesus is not bringing his own childhood into play here. In parallel to the tendency of speculating about the disposition of the child fore-grounded by Jesus, the temptation to induce aspects of the childhood of Jesus in the interpretation of the text, is virtually irresistible. White makes the point that Jesus never refers to his own childhood. He hurries, however, to show in his fourth point that the power of the sign lies exactly in the fact that the child is a sign of Jesus. The child represents Jesus in his nature, his way, his calling, and the cross (White 2011:56). In Prevette's (in White 2011:64) interpretation the *place* metaphor serves as a "theological clue" in that it points to something which the very disciples of Jesus have yet to grasp about the Kingdom. Let us now try to find out what it is that the disciples might have been missing.

4.3 A CALL TO CONVERSION

Once more, the context in which Jesus foregrounds or centralises a child is that of heavy debate amongst his disciples about issues of power. The metaphor of placing the child in the centre is sharply illustrated by the emblem of the CTM with twelve circles arranged in the form of a horse's hoof with two figures, Jesus and a child in the middle. At the very moment that adult males were concerned about their status and positions of power when the restoration of the political state of Israel has taken place, Jesus responds metaphorically. Not by merely inducing a child in metaphorical sense, but by placing a physical, bodily child in their midst. Prevette (in White 2011:64) assists somewhat in speculating that the disciples might have assumed to "have certain truths and assurances in God". He then poses the pertinent question: "Could it be that those we serve – the lowly, the broken, the abused, those that we see as recipients of our ministry – could they be pointers to something we have yet to understand in the Kingdom of God?" And then concludes that the placing of a child in the midst of the disciples, points to humility and repentance.

In a word, the identification of a child as a sign of the Kingdom, is a call to conversion. In a response to White's (2011:41-61) paper, the Unisa Missiologist, James (in White 2011:69-73) indicates four dimensions of such conversion: humility, little things and little people, realignment and repentance. For the moment I would like to focus on the last two, namely realignment and repentance. In the perspective of the child as a sign of the Kingdom, James understands the call to realignment as a call against triumphalism. In a rather insightful manner, she connects triumphalism to "Christian power, ambition and the corporatization of Christian witness". In my own

interpretation the succumbing to the seduction of power and ambition which James refers to, is indeed a contradiction to and a subversion of the sign of the child who is a sign of the reign of God. In a profound manner, the placing of the child in the centre is a call to deep and ongoing repentance. In James' understanding and in following White (2011:4-6), the very particular repentance that is required is to repent from the "thinking and believing, that great, powerful, big and rich is equal to the Kingdom of God...A review of our Kingdom epistemology and praxis is in order".

4.4 MISSION IN NARRATIVE MODE

I want to suggest that part of the reorientation or shift that is central to this paper, is a rediscovery of the Bible as a book of stories. Yet, even a statement like this would be in need of deconstruction by indicating quite clearly that the shift that is required is a shift which subverts the misconception that the Bible says very little about children. In contradicting the misconception White (2011) in his "A little child will lead them" and Brewster (2011) in his workbook on "Children and Childhood in the Bible", have shown numerous names of children, references and instances where children emerge as central to God's mission and as key to an interpretation of the reign of God.

All people all over the world, not only Africans, live in dream, story and song. Beyond the trappings of the modernist trend to rationalise, to structure, to organise for purposes of containment, people live "dream lives", "storied lives", and "sung lives". But to stay with the issue of story or narrative for a moment, I would like to suggest that in trying to show that the recourse to narrative is not a fad or a cop out, further research may be needed in the following distinct area: to bring the rediscovery of the Bible as a book of stories into critical discourse with interpretations of narrative by Ricoeur, Mc Intyre, Hauerwas, McClendon and specifically in the field of Missiology, people like van Engen.

4.5 MISSION IN CREATIVE TENSION

Up to now a rather romantic picture of the reorientation the paper has mind, might have emerged. A serious pitfall in modes of liberation theology, Black, Latin American and Feminist/Womanist, has always been to render the black oppressed, the poor and the female blameless. There is an even greater danger in foregrounding children in theology and church to present a rather sanitised and over-romantic portrayal of children. Speculation on the moral disposition of the child placed in the centre by Jesus, feeds into an overtly romanticised image of the child. Bunge (2011:20) refers to these as "simplistic views of children". In elaborating somewhat on some of the simplistic views, she points to three. First, in reference to the United States, she refers to scholars who say that in a consumer culture, a "market mentality" impacts on the attitudes towards children – this would of course be true of many countries in the world. Based on the market mentality children are then identified as commodities, consumers or economic burdens. Second, in conservative evangelical circles children are seen to be "sinful" and in need of

“discipline”. Third, main line and more liberal churches see children as “cute”, innocent” or “insignificant”. Bunge (2011: 20-29) goes on to propose that particular perspectives on children from the Bible be held in creative tension. These perspectives include the notion that children are gifts of God and sources of joy, sinful creatures and moral agents, developing beings in need of instruction and guidance, fully human and made in the image of God, models of faith and sources of revelation and in need of justice. Of particular importance for this paper is the idea that children are sources of revelation. The issue of changing the gaze when it comes to children and to respect them as a new mission hermeneutic, has to do with the challenge to accept the witness, prophecy and revelation from children as representatives of Jesus (:26).

Towards the end of the 4/14 World Summit III in Singapore in September 2011, during the closing worship and celebration, some of the youth protested against their perceived marginalisation at a meeting which was supposed to be about them. On one level they objected to the fact that an outside praise and worship team was called into service instead of using the gifts which were available at the summit. On a more serious level one of the youth leaders initially refused to accept an apology and confession from the main mover of the 4/14 movement, Luis Bush. Some adults at the summit, including a fellow South African, who fed into his deepest cultural instincts which still suggest that children should be seen, not heard, were infuriated. The point of the theological hermeneutic that is suggested in this paper is that adults should before anything else *learn to listen, learn to accept that children can sometimes be prophetic and more than that, that children can indeed be vehicles of revelation. The new hermeneutic suggests that adults should learn to see through their ears.*

To prolong the anecdote on the 4/14 Global Summit somewhat, it needs to be pointed out that quite an ugly side of some of the children on stage during the closing worship, came to the fore. But this is precisely the point Bunge (2011) is trying to make: to see children and the youth as dialectical beings.

The prospect of broadening the perspective on and commitment to children by holding divergent aspects in creative tension rather than in isolation (Bunge 2011:21), finds expression also in an interesting postcolonial perspective (Hyde 2011:11-15). Hyde proposes that children should be viewed through a “postcolonial” or “decolonizing” lens if postcolonial is understood in broad terms to extend beyond geographical colonization. For him the decolonizing lens should assist in transcending the tokenistic inclusion of children, and the conscious foregrounding of children in taking their voices and actions seriously. Such decolonizing practice, according to Hyde, must hold in tension a number of seemingly opposite ideas.

5. A NEW MISSIOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Based on the discussion thus far, I want to suggest that the emergence of children worldwide as agents of mission, necessitates a new epistemology. One of the

building blocks of such an epistemology is the suggestion by Strachan (2011:283) of “joining children in their world”. She implies quite strongly a shift in paradigm in hinting a “redress in favour of the children”. The new missiological epistemology can only come to the fore if we start in the world of children and learn from their experiences. At Edinburgh 2010 in the theme on Mission and Postmodernities, the issue of *experience being valued more than argument, and its implications for Christian witness, in life, worship and word*, was identified as one of the priorities (Kim and Anderson 2011:141). Strachan goes on to line up children’s stories from different parts of the world: Latin America, Asia, Europe and Australia. She seems to suggest that unless this new manner of knowing is grounded in narrative, it will not offer anything new. The new missiological epistemology needs to be informed by the “harsh realities of a child’s world” and needs to “create a synergy between theory and practice”.

But the new missiological epistemology also needs to be theological. Important elements in this respect emerged in one of the drafts attempted at formulating a missiological basis for the 4/14 movement in Singapore at the Global Summit III. “Mission”, it is said, “emanates from the heart of God who calls children to redemption and transformation in the words of Jesus Himself: “Let the children come unto me for theirs is the Kingdom of God”. Further fundamental aspects identified are the incarnation, i.e. God taking the form of a child and being found in the house of God at age twelve where he speaks of things unseen and unheard of. In reference to the adagium of the 4/14 movement, namely the prophecy from Joel 2:28, the Spirit is said to be energising children for mission, calling them into service as agents of transformation.

6. IS THERE A NEW EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK EMERGING?

Different angles have been introduced to answer the question whether the reorientation towards children constitutes a new theological hermeneutic. I think I have succeeded somewhat in showing that the question is not merely whether more care or more attention should be devoted to children in theology and the church, but whether children in the perspective of the reign of God, present us with a new interpretive paradigm. The question which needs to be answered still is whether this new hermeneutic constitutes a new epistemological break. Such breaks have been experienced since the nineteen seventies with the emergence of theological flows which could in broad terms be identified as modes of liberation theology.

6.1 BACHELARD, ALTHUSSER AND BOSCH

Not so much the technical term, but the idea of an epistemological break originated with the philosopher, Bachelard (1884-1962). As a social scientist Bachelard constructed the notion of epistemological obstacles. His basic argument is that the progress of science is quite often blocked by mental patterns and these obstacles need to be overcome. When such obstacles are indeed overcome or torn down, an epistemological rupture takes place. The French philosopher, Althusser (1980-1990)

has taken Bachelard's thinking further in coining the notion of an epistemological break. For Althusser an epistemological break occurs when a different set of central propositions are advanced than those previously held. Different questions are posed and a different theoretical framework is arrived at. For Althusser knowledge is not discovered - for example in terms of suddenly being able to connect a particular concept to the object it refers to. Knowledge is rather produced by way of what he perceives to be three generalities: "raw material" or abstractions and facts, a particular "problematic" and thirdly, a transformed theoretical entity or concrete knowledge. This new knowledge constitutes a break or a cut with previous ideological conceptions.

6.2 EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

For theology in general and Missiology in particular, none other has helped more than Bosch (1991) to interpret the idea of an epistemological break. The break in contextualisation, Bosch shows, is constituted by a cut (Althusser) between a theology from above which is an elitist enterprise and a theology from below. A theology from below which is inductive in nature, breaks with the dominant epistemological approach of Western science, philosophy and theology that are aimed at legitimising the status quo and protecting the interests of the West. Of course, in using this type of language, I remain wary of creating caricatures. The global reality has become much more complex and cannot simply be interpreted in terms of the old binaries between the West and the rest. A second issue as far as the epistemological break is concerned, is to perceive of the world not as a static object only to be explained, but as a reality to be changed. Third, in a theology from below, the very first act is commitment. And therefore a theology from below is a "with" theology. In concrete terms, and in the context of the paper, a theology where purportedly children are the interpretive key, cannot be a theology about or for children, but a theology "with" children. In Africa the challenge to develop a theology "with" children might be greater than anywhere else. It is not for nothing that in his reflection on the matter, Malherbe (2004) entitles his piece in the form of a question: *Child Theology in Africa?* The hesitancy derives from "the lowly position children generally assume within African society" (:5). "We may say", contends Malherbe, "that in many parts of the continent children have not yet been discovered". Even in South Africa which is generally seen to be a more advanced and privileged country, the situation is far from ideal if a survey is to be taken seriously in which the country is exposed as "child welfare negligent" (quoted in Malherbe 2004:6). Fifth, the epistemological break is constituted by the fact that a theology from below is a "doing" theology, i.e. a theology informed by a hermeneutic of the deed.

7. CONCLUSION

The question remains. Is the new lens which is suggested in the paper, the new handle, constituting an epistemological rupture? Initially I was tempted to come to the following conclusion: the most we can say is that this new hermeneutic forced upon us by children, is an extension or a prolonging of the same break in theoretical

framework that has emerged in theological flows around the world in the late nineteen sixties, early nineteen seventies. I have had a rethink on the basis of a set of very simple, but pertinent questions: Is the poor, destitute child factored into Latin American liberation theology? Is feminist or womanist theology informed by the context of the lowly, marginalised girl child? Is Black theology based on the experiences of the black, hungry, dis-eased, illiterate township child? Are these mere rhetorical questions? Academic questions for that matter? No, these are life and death questions and the categorical answer to them is, **NO!**

An important insight from the reflection on paradigm shifts (Kuhn 1970), is that from time to time there are anomalies operating in science which cannot be explained by the universally accepted paradigm, if paradigm is understood not only as referring to the current theory, but to the entire worldview in which it exists. With reference to children in relation to theology, church and society there are numerous anomalies operating. In theology the need for developing good Sunday school material will be acknowledged, yet such material might be produced without any manner of input from children. In the church, children will forever be present in the Sunday school, the children's guild, the children's brigade, they will watch on with starry eyes when adults take their place at the communion table, but hardly ever will the "lens of the child" be used "in order to provide new insights into central themes of the Christian faith, e.g. how would we redefine the doctrine of the church if we took children seriously?" (Naka in White 2011:149).

In South African society in particular and Africa in general the challenge posed by children as a new lens for interpreting the social, cultural, political and economic realities, is the more serious. In context therefore, the South African/African child who is fore-grounded, is still very much the one who lifts a clenched fist, the aids orphan, the child soldier, the illiterate, the molested, the abused, the hungry, the child whose parents still face the triple challenge of unequal, uneducated and unemployed. These are the ones whom Jesus places in the centre to reveal to us the meaning of church and of the Kingdom of God. To see this is to understand that a whole new paradigm, a rupture is emerging of which theology and the church must account.