



Word & World
Volume XV, Number 1
Winter 1995

A Sanctuary for Childhood in a Culture of Indifference

HERBERT ANDERSON

*Catholic Theological Union
Chicago*

SUSAN B. W. JOHNSON

*Hyde Park Union Church
Chicago*

His feelings for this little creature were not at all what he had expected. There was not an atom of pride or joy in them; on the contrary, he was oppressed by a new sense of apprehension – the consciousness of another vulnerable region.

—Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*¹

A NEWBORN CHILD IS A MYSTERY. WE ARE AMAZED HOW SOMETHING SO TINY and vulnerable survives the ordeal of birth. We wonder at the delicate hands and small gestures and loud sounds that come from such small bodies. There is also a fierce dignity of the newly born that sometimes startles us. Every newborn child is a new creation, and the unique personality of each infant child is beyond human reckoning.

When we regard a child in this way, each new life becomes a miracle, a unique gift to be protected and nourished. Yet the greatest wonder of all is that every newly born child possesses already the fullness of being human. Children

¹Quoted in *The Oxford Book of Marriage*, ed. Helga Rubinstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 169.

HERBERT ANDERSON is a Lutheran pastor, father of two grown children, and a professor of pastoral theology. SUSAN B. W. JOHNSON is a Baptist minister and the mother of two growing children.

are not simply incomplete adults. From birth, we are as fully human as we will ever become.

When we stop to admire a child, we may not necessarily regard that child as fully human. And if we do not, we are more likely to treat children with indifference or even contempt in our families and in our societies. It is a subtle dilemma. We believe that beneath the public debate about family values and single mothers or the alarm about the plight of our families and the inability to establish a family-friendly society lies a deeper and more troubling reality: *we have fostered a culture of indifference toward our children.*

I. CONTEMPORARY SIGNS OF CONTEMPT

Some years ago, a national magazine ran a story under the heading “Do We Hate Our Children?” This remains a haunting question. Most parents say they want the best for their children even though they may not be able to provide it. Nonetheless, in a world where children are neglected, abused, and abandoned, where military spending exhausts limited resources, where children are the first victims of poverty and the regular casualties of war and exploitation, we cannot avoid concluding that children are in trouble. We have used the phrase “culture of indifference” to identify the ways in which children are at risk everywhere in this society and around the globe.

During the year we wrote the book *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families*,² from which this essay is taken, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a daily series titled “Killing our children,” for which it has since received a Pulitzer prize. Every day we read terrible stories about violence of one kind or another against the children of our city. At the same time, we talked with children, families, pastors, teachers, social workers, therapists, and others about the regard for children in our society. We heard anguish, concern, frustration, powerlessness, and fear not only from urban children and families but from people in small towns in Iowa or New England and from rural Mississippi. We discovered not only failures and limitations within parents and families, but failures and obstructions within their supporting environments—schools, neighborhoods, religious communities. What we heard corresponded to the report of the United Nations World Summit on Children.³ Children are in trouble all over the world. Signs of indifference are everywhere.

- A recent study revealed that children in the United States are twice as likely to be the victims of violent crime as adults, and in less than half the cases is the offender another juvenile.
- School buildings fall into disrepair and standardized test scores drop because state legislatures and municipal governments and taxpayers do not develop resources for education.

²Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

³UNICEF, *Children and Development in the 1990's: A UNICEF Sourcebook* (New York, 1990).

- From suburban malls to urban streets, the gathering of young people is increasingly restricted and feared. In a small town outside Sydney, Australia, the council removed a street bench after two complaints of youth gathering there. A petition with over 200 signatures could not bring the bench back.
- Time off from work to deal with sick children is a source of jealousy and even litigation among co-workers, as though it constituted leisure time.
- Portable cribs, disposable diapers and bottles, baby joggers and collapsible strollers give the appearance of being child-oriented, but they extend the illusion that children do not impede the pace or alter the priorities of parental freedom and adult living.
- Parents invade a child's world with adult expectations or verbally humiliate a child in the grocery store.
- The government and the business sector, though not responsible for the nurture of children, are unwilling to pass laws and establish policies that create an environment in which children and families flourish.

It is not easy to understand or accept the depth of contempt for the well-being of children in our society. Certainly not every parent or adult is indifferent toward children. Moreover, many homes and neighborhoods are emotionally safe enough and economically stable enough to foster our children's growth. Still, too many of our children are underfed and homeless or suffer from emotional impoverishment and physical abuse; the deeper reality of indifference cannot be ignored. It is not easy for us to grasp or put into practice the idea that children are people deserving our full respect. Consequently, our children are being victimized by the indifference of society.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE OF INDIFFERENCE

The struggle to establish and maintain appropriate attitudes toward children is not new. At least three attitudes about children have been and continue to be sources of contempt: children as the property of parents; children as depraved sinners; and children as incomplete beings needing to be formed. Each of those perspectives has had advocates from within the Christian tradition. Even treating childhood as a separate stage in human development did not necessarily improve the well-being of children. Since children are pictured as provisional, subordinate, irrational, and vulnerable, it is not surprising that people often try to ignore their childhood (and so children) when they grow older.

Our personal anxiety as parents compounds this history of indifference toward children. In the quotation with which we began this essay, Leo Tolstoy wrote of the anxiety a father felt at the birth of his child. Despite the pride and joy of many parents, the anxiety which Tolstoy explored is also real. Danger, imperfection, intrigue, and evil fill our world. If it is a dangerous place for adults, it is certainly no place for a child. Children confront us with the consciousness of "another vulnerable region" that we must protect. It is not surprising that the birth of a child into an unsafe world demands courageous faith. The mixture of personal anxiety

with societal indifference multiplies in a parent; it may be a source of such overwhelming vulnerability that it leads to contempt.

The avoidance by adults of this vulnerability is another source of our indifference toward children. Janet Pais, who has worked as both an attorney and a parish director of religious education, suggests that adults have contempt for children precisely because they are small, weak, and needful. "Adults define themselves as strong, children as weak, and adults have no use for weakness."⁴ They are indifferent toward children because adults cannot accept their own vulnerability. Pais goes on to assert that contempt for the weakness and vulnerability of childhood underlies the various forms of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse of children. The issue obviously goes beyond children. In a society that glorifies size, strength, and self-sufficiency, anyone who is small, weak, or needful is contemptible. Contempt for what is powerless and vulnerable is a rationalization for broader, more pervasive patterns of oppression and discrimination. The transformation of our attitude toward being a child is therefore one of the fundamental and urgent agendas of our time.

The decline of the two-parent family is frequently identified as the primary factor eroding the well-being of children in this society. In particular, the absence of many fathers from family living is cited as a major cause of this crisis. The solution, according to this view, is to strengthen two-parent families as the normative setting for raising healthy children. We fully concur with the need to strengthen the family for the sake of our children. We do not believe, however, that the family can do it alone. Too often the family is scapegoated for ills it did not create so that the larger society need not change.

The crisis of the family cannot be separated from the health of a host of other social institutions, cultural assumptions, and philosophical and religious commitments which affect and are affected by the family. These are also in crisis. They hang together like an intricately woven fabric which is unravelling before our eyes. We cannot fix one without fixing the others. Robert Bellah is correct when he suggests in *The Good Society*, that "the task of restoring family life, whatever form the family may take, cannot be the family's alone."⁵ We need a vision of a more just social order that is large enough to support the present constellation of families in building communities that are life-enhancing.

The family has proven itself durable but not powerful in industrialized societies. We have witnessed, even applauded, an accommodating flexibility in the family that has contributed to the economic vitality of our nation. According to German sociologist Ulrich Beck, the family does not have the clout to demand what it needs in the face of current economic pressures and realities. Beck observes that the family is not strong enough to contend with market forces if it should choose to do so. Ultimately, "the market model of modernity presupposes a society

⁴Janet Pais, *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991) 9.

⁵Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) 260.

without families or marriages....The ultimate market society is a *childless* society – unless the children grow up with mobile, single, fathers and mothers.”⁶ The contradiction between the demands of a free-market economy and the needs of family living cannot be resolved without major change. What is required is a fundamental shift in the whole social agenda.

III. ALTERNATIVES TO INDIFFERENCE

Transforming our attitude toward children is a process that must occur at many levels and in many ways. If we regard children as people from birth, they have the status of full humanity in our families and full citizenship in church and society. In order for adults to regard children as fully human beings of equal worth, the rights of children will need to modify the rights of adults. This is an improbable ideal and a necessary dream. It is improbable because modern societies have become increasingly adult-centered. It is necessary because we will otherwise allow the technical, industrial, computerized worlds we inhabit to become more impersonal and dangerous for children and adults alike.

To assure its future, the family needs a critical voice to speak to the culture and society about and on behalf of children. There are so many needs that are linked to the family, and so many forces working against its well-being, that the family is often unable to articulate its own agenda; it is unable to speak up for children and childhood. The voice of the family calls for our deepest ecological passions and our best political wisdom, but our culture of indifference toward the plight of children and families renders it inaudible. We have lost our ease with interdependence between family and society, and we live in a time when we only reclaim relationship and responsibility with wrenching negotiation. Families are only beginning to learn what and how to speak.

The culture of indifference toward children, in fact, exists in stark contrast to another growing awareness expressed by the African proverb: “It takes a village to raise a child.” Raising children is a communal activity; families do not and cannot do it alone. In the village model, the family’s relationship to society presumes both public and private aspects of family living; the family is the crucible in which the needs of the individual and the needs of the community are negotiated and balanced. This model asserts that it takes a village to raise a child because we care for one another’s children and because we receive care from other units of society. It also recognizes that the village is created and maintained by individuals and families. The community never takes the place of parents and families, but it does encourage and undergird children and families. By the same token, families acknowledge what they receive from the community and contribute to it in order to insure its continued success. The relationship between the family and society is governed by the principle of interdependent responsibility. Where there is no village, the family will fail.

⁶Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992) 116.

The transformation of our attitudes toward children and childhood will not be effected quickly or without struggle. Nor will it always be easy to measure the change when it occurs. If, however, we begin to act with the assumption that children are fully human from birth and worthy of our deepest respect and that adults never outgrow childhood, we believe there will be consequences for our behavior toward children: (1) If we honor childhood as full humanity, we will learn to “go at the pace of the children.” We will not go so fast or expect too much lest we leave a child behind. (2) When adults are comfortable with the vulnerability of their own enduring childhood, it is easier for them to be empathic with a child’s experience of the world. Being empathic with children is even more emotionally demanding than slowing our pace or rearranging our schedules. To see the world through the eyes of a child requires a radical change in how and what adults perceive. (3) If parents understand childhood as fully human, it will be easier to respect and honor children without indulging them. The most loving thing that adults can do for children is to respect the integrity of their full humanity from birth.

IV. THE CHURCH AS A SANCTUARY FOR CHILDHOOD

By its theology, the church is committed to welcoming children and honoring childhood. In the birth of the Christchild, God took on the powerlessness, weakness, and need of human childhood for the sake of our salvation. The deeper truth of this gospel of God the child, as Janet Pais has observed, “requires us to place the highest value on children and treat them with ultimate seriousness and respect.”⁷ Jesus further revolutionized our understanding of being human when he suggested that childhood is a criterion for Christian discipleship (Mark 10:13-16). The Christian understands that humanity in its fullness is vulnerable, open, and always emerging and unfolding. The full identification of Jesus with the child (Mark 9:36-37) is the foundation for our conviction that childhood is not something we outgrow. We learn from children about being human *and* about being disciples of Jesus.

In its practice, the church has been a witness on behalf of children, yet it has often failed to embody the vision of the new human community it proclaims. Children are often excluded from full practicing membership in the church community. The church has been reluctant to rectify teachings that have been misused to promote the abuse of the less powerful—whether children, women, minorities, the poor, the handicapped, or the oppressed. Most graphically, the church has participated in the culture of indifference toward childhood through its silence and complicity in instances of child sexual abuse. The prophetic voice of the church has been weakened by its inability to practice what it proclaims.

It is urgent that the church speak a clear, prophetic voice for anyone who is small, weak, and needy not only because our children are in danger, but also

⁷Pais, *Suffer the Children*, 16.

because our response to them is the measure of our regard for all humanity. In ancient Israel, a sanctuary was a place of special holiness where people worshiped. It was a place apart. In the middle ages, a church could also be a sanctuary where people who were vulnerable for a variety of reasons would be safe. For example, anyone who touched the door knocker of the cathedral in Durham, England, was protected. Because the church is a place that signifies the presence of God, it must also be a place of safety and protection for people. A church in which members work to become a community where children are welcomed and honored as fully human and where there is compassion and justice for all persons will become a sanctuary for childhood. Such a community will provide the kind of protection that fosters freedom for everyone, children and adults alike, to be vulnerable and interdependent as well as strong and self-sufficient.

If a church transforms its attitude toward children in order to be a sanctuary for childhood, it will deepen the sacred trust of its access to families. What it has ordinarily done for children and families throughout the stages of life and faith will take on new significance. The church that is a sanctuary for childhood will (1) welcome children as full participants in the life of God's people; (2) support parents in their ever-changing parenthood; (3) attend to the formation of faithful children with new urgency; (4) intervene when children or families experience extraordinary problems and needs; (5) advocate for systemic change where families are endangered by social conditions; and (6) challenge individuals, families, society, and the church itself to a deepening regard for childhood as the measure of God's justice and mercy in the world.

The troubling reality for many churches is that they have more tasks to do than resources to do them. Families and churches are alike in that matter. More and more is being asked of fewer and fewer. Churches regularly struggle in their response to the crises and demands of children and families while still articulating a compelling vision in response to the larger cultural and social issues of our day. Both roles are pivotal, linked together in the promise that God continues to make all things new. The church and the family share a common agenda with larger social structures like neighborhoods and government. Unless the larger social environments begin to change, not even the church—with all its charity and compassion—will be able to meet the desperate needs of families and children today.

We end where we began. The fundamental challenge of our time is the transformation of our attitude toward children and childhood from indifference to respect. It is a challenge for which the church is uniquely qualified. Governments may pass laws requiring fathers to pay child support. Corporations and small businesses may decide it is in their interest to provide day-care centers and generous family leaves. Neighborhoods may mobilize organized vigilance against crime or add playgrounds and park benches. All these actions will enhance the environment for children. Yet in order for these changes to endure, we need to honor the full humanity of children.

The role of the church is to become a counter-cultural community that lives

according to the paradoxical belief that the fullness of humanity is to be found in struggling toward childhood. Jesus placed a child at the center of the circle as he spoke to the disciples. The faithfulness of the church's witness to Jesus is measured by how it regards the weakest and most vulnerable in our midst. When a society understands and is in sympathy with childhood, it will not wield power over others, heroicize violence, practice discrimination, teach hate, destroy the environment, or preach materialism or indifference toward anyone. A church that is a sanctuary for childhood will not lose its theological focus, although a variety of issues may emerge and recede over time. Children are not more important than the poor, the sick, the elderly, or the environment itself, but our compassion for childhood (and thus, for children) is a life-sign. With it we take our pulse as humanity.