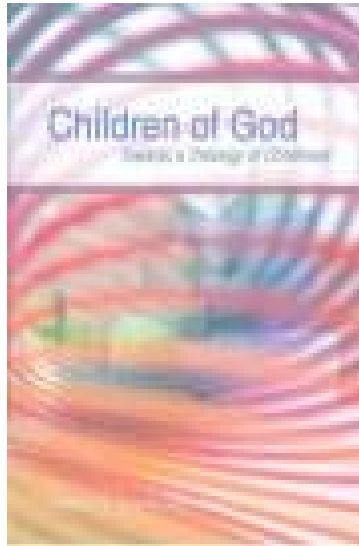


## ***Children of God: Towards a Theology of Childhood***

*Angela Shier-Jones*, Peterborough UK: Epworth, 2007.

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‘What is God saying to us in the existence of childhood?’ sets the scene for this book (xii). The reference is not just to childhood as a phase of life [of separation and dependence] but as ‘a part of our being before God.’ In the background of these essays is the concern to counter the tendency to ‘objectify’ children and engage in anthropological studies with objective and ‘non-interactive analysis’ (xii).

This project involves authors from the United Kingdom, mainly from the Methodist tradition. In addressing childhood and children as a subject of theological enquiry, it takes the reader through the various phases of childhood. The essays are fresh and, at times, controversial, but always give children the attention they deserve.

The book brings Scriptural sources into dialogue with contemporary disciplines, e.g., science, psychology and social work. It discusses topics such as dependency, identity, education and the role of government, the problems surrounding delinquency and what does it mean to move towards maturity. Can we, the children of God, ever ‘grow up’ and what would be grow into if we did?

Let’s take a sample of some key ideas. Child-bearing and child-caring are a community vocation rather than a ‘private occupation’ argues Natalie K. Watson. The relationship between dependency and identity is Jeremy Worthen’s concern as he makes soundings in the Jewish and Christian tradition about the role of child as a

person. Sheryl Anderson explores the role of rebellion and defiance in the transition to adulthood and its theological implications. In a bracing discussion, Anthony Reddie argues that the way Scripture is read and related to Church teachings can 'prove just as abusive and manipulative of a child's formation as any deliberately, determinedly secular approach can be' (xv). Angela Shier- Jones concludes with a theological reflection of what we can learn from the dialogue between Scripture and the social sciences on biological childhood and what it means to be a child of God.

Given the book's provenance, there is an understandable emphasis on Scripture as the main Christian resource in the conversation. Nevertheless, we see in the book a breadth of theological horizons and, refreshingly, attitudes that cut across confessional boundaries.

While the book is offered as a 'primer' to open up theological discussion, the editor does point to the need for further work, e.g., childhood sexuality, play, gender identity etc. One would hope this would include an effort to engage theologically with the extensive research on the spirituality of children and their intrinsic, even biological, bent towards religious awareness. For instance, the eighth International conference on Children's Spirituality was held at the Ballarat Campus the Australian Catholic University in January 2008. While the 'innate spirituality' of children is noted by Reddie (98), it is not probed as an important resource for a theology of childhood. There is a brief reference to David Hay and Rebecca Nye's *The Spirit of the Child* – a significant study. Their book is a helpful complement to this insightful and readable *Children of God*.

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