Introduction

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Every person on earth once was or is a child. It is a role all human beings share. Not all human beings are siblings or parents. Not all are aunts or uncles. We all have different types of roles and responsibilities, whether at home, at work, or in civic life, and we live in different familial, social, and political contexts. Clearly, our conceptions of childhood vary widely across time and traditions. We do not even agree when childhood ends and adulthood begins. Yet, however we might define childhood or interact with children, we acknowledge that all human beings begin life as infants and develop as children. Furthermore, infants and children make up a significant portion of many communities. Even if we do not agree on a set age for the end of childhood, we can appreciate the importance of children just by noting that around the world today approximately one-third of humanity is under the age of 18.

Since all human beings once were or are children, children and childhood are bound to be central themes in ethical and moral reflection. Indeed, over centuries and across communities and cultures today, human beings have raised a number of fundamental questions about children and our commitments to them. Who or what is a child? How or why do we value children? What do parents owe their children? What are society's obligations to them? What are a child's basic needs? How do we ensure those needs are met? Who is responsible for a child if a parent dies or in cases of divorce? Who should intervene if a parent or guardian appears to neglect or to exploit a child? Who can or should speak on behalf of a child? What are children's own obligations to parents and the wider community? What are their particular roles, capacities, duties, and responsibilities? When should a child take on adult responsibilities? When does childhood end and adulthood begin? Do children themselves have rights? Does the international community have responsibilities to children? How far do our obligations to children outside our families or local communities extend?

Such questions have also been addressed in the past and continue to be asked today by the world's religions. Most religious traditions express particular understandings of the nature and value of children. Furthermore, they typically address adult obligations not only to children in one's own family and religious community but also to orphans or other children in need. Many religious traditions, for example, speak to various duties and obligations surrounding the conception, birth, naming, nursing, weaning, coming of age, faith formation, moral development, and education of children. They delineate responsibilities for poor, sick, abandoned, orphaned, or exploited children, and outline children's own duties and responsibilities to parents and the larger community.

These and other ethical issues and questions regarding children have become especially pressing amidst shared public concern about children and child well-being. Across religious and secular lines, both nationally and internationally, there is heightened awareness of the many challenges children face today. Many children in rich and poor nations alike live in poverty and often are malnourished, receive an inadequate education, or lack proper health care.[1] In many countries, child poverty is related to a host of other serious problems, such as drug abuse, child labor, child soldiers, AIDS orphans, child-headed households, and sexually exploited children. Even children in affluent families often suffer neglect and abuse or struggle with addictions to drugs or alcohol. Parents, religious and civic leaders, and child advocates also wonder about the effects of technology, the media, and global market pressures on rich and poor children alike. Political leaders and child advocates around the world who represent both secular and faith-based non-governmental organizations are seeking ways to address such problems and to speak to the needs of children. Lively debates regarding children and their needs have also been prompted by international documents or initiatives seeking to address children's well-being and rights, such as the *Millennium Development Goals* and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).[2]

[1] For more information about the situation of children worldwide, see for example: The Children's Defense Fund (www.childrensdefense.org); The United Nations Children's Fund (www.unicef.org); Childwatch International Research Network (www.childwatch.uio.no); and Save the Children (www.savethechildren.org).

[2] The Convention was passed in 1989 by the United Nations General Assembly. Since then, it has been ratified by all nations except the United States and Somalia. The full text of the Convention is widely available online. See, for example, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm.

GROWTH OF CHILDHOOD STUDIES IN THE ACADEMY

The concern for children found globally and within religious communities today is also reflected in the growing interest in issues regarding children in the academy. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines are now focusing more attention on children and contributing to the new and burgeoning field of childhood studies. This interdisciplinary field has grown over the past few years, as scholars have undertaken studies on children and childhood not only in education and psychology but also history, law, literature, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology.[3]

Research in all of these areas regarding children is opening up new lines of inquiry, challenging preconceptions about children, and even, in some fields, reshaping research methodologies. Childhood studies takes seriously not only adult perceptions of or behavior toward children and children's vulnerabilities but also children's perceptions and experiences and their own capacities. The attention to children's voices, capacities, agency, and participation has, in turn, prompted scholars to rethink and reshape their own research questions and methods and disciplinary theories and practices, taking into account the ideas and actions of children themselves and the complexities of child–adult relationships. Growing academic interest in the subject of childhood is also generating collaboration among scholars from several disciplines, leading in some cases to the development of interdisciplinary childhood studies programs or centers.[4] Since scholars working in the area of childhood studies, whatever their particular discipline or area of expertise, often share a concern for the situation of children today, they also are forging creative and cooperative relationships among scholars, child advocates, and public-policy makers.

[3] There are now a number of introductions to childhood studies with contributions from scholars across several disciplines, such as: Dominic Wyse (ed.), *Childhood Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Mary Jane Kehily (ed.), *An Introduction to Childhood Studies* (Oxford: Open University Press, 2004); and Peter B. Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth (eds.), *Rethinking Childhood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004). See also Richard Shweder (ed.), *The Child: An Encyclopedic Companion* (University of Chicago Press, 2009); and interdisciplinary and international journals devoted to childhood studies, such as *Childhood* or *Childhoods Today*.

[4] See, for example, the Center for Children and Childhood Studies (Rutgers University, United States); the Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth (University of Sheffield, United Kingdom); the Centre for the Social Study of Childhood (University of Hull, United Kingdom); the Department of Child Studies (Linköping University, Sweden); the Holistic Child Development Institute (Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, Malaysia); or the Centre for Child Research (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway).

THE THEME OF CHILDHOOD IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND ETHICS

In line with these trends, scholars in diverse areas of religious studies, ethics, and theology are also beginning to focus attention directly on children and childhood.[5] Examples of the breadth and depth of current scholarship on childhood in these fields can be found in this volume's Select Bibliography. Religious scholars have begun to explore more fully the role of children in the history and development of diverse religious traditions, thereby contributing to the history of religions as well as to the history of childhood in general. Ethicists and theologians have addressed parenting, the best interests of children, adoption, children's moral status and agency, child poverty, and children's rights. The American Academy of Religion (AAR), the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the Society of Christian Ethics, the Society of Jewish Ethics, the Islamic Society of North America, and other academic and professional organizations have also devoted sessions or program units at their conferences and annual meetings to the themes of religion and childhood.[6] In all areas of theology and religious studies, journals are devoting entire issues to the theme of children, and scholars are also finding many more opportunities to present work on childhood at professional meetings or through specially funded national and international symposia or research projects.[7]

Scholars both within and outside religious studies are also interested in examining the spiritual development and experiences of children and adolescents in diverse religions and cultures worldwide.[8] Various not-for-profit institutes and projects have begun to hold conferences on children's

[5] For an overview of developments in these areas, see Marcia J. Bunge, "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006): 549–579; and the "Introduction," in Don S. Browning and Marcia Bunge (eds.), *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

[6] See, for example, the "Childhood Studies and Religion Consultation" of the AAR (www.aarweb.org) and the "Children in the Biblical World" program unit of the SBL (www.sbl-site.org).

[7] See, for example, *Word and World* (1995); *Dialog* 37 (summer 1998); *Interpretation* 55, no. 2 (2001); *Conservative Judaism* 53, no. 4 (summer 2001); the *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 17 (2002); *Christian Reflection* (July 2003); *The Living Pulpit* 12, no. 4 (2003); *Sewanee Theological Review* 48, no. 1 (2004); *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000); *African Ecclesial Review* 46, no. 2 (2004); the *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006); and *Evangelische Theologie* 71 (2011).

[8] For example, the Search Institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence helped support the publication of two books on child spirituality. See E. C. Roehlkepartain, P. E. King, L. M. Wagener and P. L. Benson (eds.), *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006); and K.-M. Yust, A. N. Johnson, S. E. Sasso and E. C. Roehlkepartain (eds.), *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). For more information on the project, see www.Search-Institute.org.

spirituality, attracting scholars and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines.[9] One of the important themes being explored is the role of children in religious communities and children's own religious and spiritual experiences and ideas. While recognizing the challenges and limitations of studying children's own experiences, scholars have found a variety of ethnographic, literary, historical, and social-scientific methods for seeking to understand children's experiences. Some of this work, initially begun mainly by psychologists, is now being carried out by scholars in a variety of fields through a range of approaches that seek to honor children's voices and their own agency.[10] Another theme scholars are exploring is the role of religion and spirituality in child development. Although there is certainly disturbing evidence about the negative role religion has sometimes played in the lives of children, a growing body of social-scientific research indicates that religions can also be sources of strength for children and child well-being. Religious communities can provide children with resources, mentors, and a sense of meaning and purpose that help them to thrive.[11]

AIMS AND UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS VOLUME

Although attention to children and child well-being is growing in public debate and in all areas of the academy, including religious studies, this volume represents one of the first collaborative efforts to provide a highly informed and focused study of religious and ethical perspectives on children within three religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The volume aims to deepen our understanding of fundamental beliefs and practices

[9] See, for example, the ChildSpirit Institute (www.childspirit.org); the International Association for Children's Spirituality (www.childrenspirituality.org); and Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives (www.childspirituality.org).

[10] For a range of approaches that take seriously children's voices and their own moral, spiritual, and religious agency and strive to understand children's perspectives on their spiritual lives and religious beliefs and practices, see, for example, Susan B. Ridgely (ed.), *The Study of Children in Religion: A Methods Handbook* (New York University Press, 2011); David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; revised edition, 2006); and Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009). For earlier studies, see David Heller, *The Children's God* (University of Chicago Press, 1986); Ana-Maria Rizutto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (University of Chicago Press, 1979); and Robert Coles, *The Religious Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990).

[11] Several studies have explored the benefits of children's participation in faith communities. See, for example, Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005). The Search Institute has also found that involvement in a religious community is one of forty important "developmental assets" that strengthens child well-being.

within these three traditions regarding children, adult obligations to them, and children's own obligations to others; to draw attention to selected challenges facing children today and faithful responses to them; and to underline the significance of sustained and serious ethical, inter-religious, and interdisciplinary reflection on children. All chapters are written by highly respected scholars from diverse strands within these three religious traditions, and the book as a whole represents a range of religious perspectives on fundamental questions about the nature and status of children and adult–child relationships and responsibilities.

The volume uniquely focuses directly on religious and ethical perspectives on children and childhood in three faith traditions. Certainly, in the field of ethics there are numerous studies on issues closely related to the subject of children, such as abortion, reproductive technology, gender relations in the family, love, and altruism. Some of these studies focus on one specific religious tradition, and others compare ideas found within several religious traditions.[12] Furthermore, one can find extensive literature devoted to other contemporary moral issues that deeply affect the lives of many children, families, and communities, such as just-war theories, ethical positions on torture, human rights, environmental ethics, care of those with disabilities, sexual ethics, business ethics, or health-care ethics. Many books about these issues are also being published that include multi-religious perspectives.[13] However, few studies in religious ethics – whether about one religious tradition alone or several – are devoted directly to reflection on the moral status of children, the moral and spiritual capacities of children themselves, child–parent relationships, or wider social obligations to children. Still fewer ethical studies on children bring faith traditions into conversation with one another. Even current religious and ethical studies on human nature, human dignity, or human rights are often built on a narrow model of human beings as adults alone, ignoring both the development and full humanity of children.

[12] There are numerous and valuable studies about perspectives on these issues from one particular religious tradition. For studies that include perspectives from a number of religious traditions, see, for example: Daniel C. Maguire (ed.), *Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2003); or Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (eds.), *Altruism in World Religions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

[13] See, for example, George Hunsinger (ed.), *Torture is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and People of Conscience Speak Out* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); William Schweiker (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Irene Bloom, J. Paul Martin and Wayne L. Proudfoot (eds.), *Religious Diversity and Human Rights* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996); or Peggy Morgan and Clive A. Lawton (eds.), *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

The sixteen chapters of this volume are divided into two parts.

Part I, "Religious Understandings of Children: Central Beliefs and Practices," includes eight chapters that address fundamental questions regarding views of children in these three traditions. These questions include:

- How do these faith traditions view the nature and status of children?
- How do they speak about differences between boys and girls?
- How do they view the obligations of parents, religious communities, and the state to children, especially those in need?
- How do they view the roles and responsibilities of children?
- What rituals and practices play a central role in the faith formation and daily lives of children?
- How might religious communities today draw from the wisdom of their traditions and strengthen their conceptions of children and obligations to them?
- What resources or implications might reflection on children and childhood have for the field of religious ethics or for inter-religious dialogue?

Part II, "Responsibilities of Children and Adults: Selected Contemporary Issues and Challenges," includes eight chapters that address particular responsibilities of children and adults, and various challenges of carrying them out in contemporary contexts. Thus, this part of the volume addresses selected contemporary moral and ethical questions regarding children's own roles and responsibilities as well as adult obligations to children both within and outside one's own religious community, such as:

- How should children carry out their own responsibilities to families and the wider community, especially given growing awareness today of the vulnerabilities and developmental needs of children as well as their strengths and growing moral capacities?
- How should parents and members of religious communities teach or pass on the faith to their own children, especially within pluralistic and multi-cultural contexts today and amidst social changes and economic pressures?
- What are a religious community's obligations to children in need both within and outside the faith community, especially given the number of poor and exploited children, malnourished children, orphans, foster children, and child-headed households around the world today?
- How do the values and norms of religious communities regarding children correspond to current national and international laws, especially those regarding child protection and children's rights?

As these questions and, indeed, the book's title indicate, the essays underscore diverse conceptions of children and adults both *within* and *across* these traditions, and highlight many kinds of commitments, obligations, responsibilities, and duties that cross generational and religious lines. Although notions of "child" and "adult" are complex and varied, these three traditions emphasize several responsibilities shared by adults for children, by children for families and communities, by children and adults for God and each other, and by members of all three faith communities for children in need. The Select Bibliography provides additional resources for exploring further diverse religious perspectives and shared responsibilities regarding children.

Even though the chapters in this volume cannot be exhaustive, they are wide-ranging and prompt further research in this area. Each religious tradition has diverse strands, and no volume could fully represent the range of beliefs and practices regarding children reflected across and within religious traditions. Furthermore, children today face numerous challenges, and their parents and religious leaders struggle daily with ethical and moral issues regarding children in their midst and around the world. Nevertheless, the volume reveals much about some central beliefs, practices, and norms in each tradition and provides the springboard for further research and discussion about ethical obligations to children and children's own capacities and responsibilities to their families and others.

SELECTED FINDINGS

Although the volume could have included essays from other religious traditions, focusing on these three traditions gives a solid start for further sustained ethical work and inter-religious dialogue about children. This is the case for a number of reasons.

The members of these three traditions make up about half of the world's population, and their histories and stories are bound up with one another. In the past and still today, they have lived in peace with one another yet have also been at war; they have studied together yet also murdered each other. People of goodwill in all three faith traditions have sought and seek today to understand one another and to live in peace. Christianity initially grew as one movement within Judaism, later spreading to Gentiles (or non-Jews). Jesus himself was a Jew. He was circumcised as an infant, participated in Jewish religious practices, such as Passover, and studied and cited the Torah. Although the books included in the Christian Bible vary slightly among major branches of Christianity, they all incorporate not only

the New Testament but also the material found in the Hebrew Scriptures that Jews call the *Tanakh* (an acronym for its three main parts) and that Christians re-arrange and call the Old Testament.[14] Islam is connected to and distinct from both Judaism and Christianity. Although Muslims do not believe Jesus is divine, they list Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others alongside Muhammad as prophets of God. Although many Muslims understand the *Tanakh* and the Bible as corrupted versions of the word of God, their sacred text, the Qur'ān, incorporates stories and characters found in both.

Furthermore, some common foundational values and commitments are found in the sacred scriptures of all three traditions. For example, all three traditions are monotheistic and include commandments to love God and to care for others. The *Shema*, the famous prayer recited daily by Jews, includes these verses from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). Jewish sources include many versions of this commandment as well as what is sometimes called the Great Commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Christian sources build on these two central commandments. In the New Testament, Jesus answers a question about which commandment is the first by saying, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29–31; see also Matthew 22:34–40 and Luke 10:26–28). Several verses in the Qur'ān emphasize submission to the one God, stating "He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute" (Qur'ān 112:1–2); and "But keep in remembrance the name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him whole-heartedly" (Qur'ān 73:8). In addition to emphasizing submission to Allah, the Qur'ān calls on believers to care for or "do good" to others: "Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good – to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer" (Qur'ān 4:36).

[14] The three central parts of the *Tanakh* are the Torah (in the narrow sense of the word, meaning the first five books of the Bible); Neviim (eight books of the Prophets, including Isaiah and Jeremiah); and Ketuvm (eleven books of the Writings, including Proverbs and the Psalms). See "The Number and Sequence of the Books of the Bible," in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. xxi–xxiii.

In all three traditions, these central commandments are intimately related, and they influence Jewish, Christian, and Muslim perspectives on the treatment of all persons, including children. For example, since they believe that God is the Creator, all three traditions value human life, including the life of infants and children. They have many ways of expressing the value of children, such as calling them blessings or gifts of God. In the biblical texts, human beings, both "male and female," are created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27), and this affirmation is applied also to infants and children, both boys and girls. The Qur'ān states that life is "sacred" and killing one's children "for fear of want" is a "great sin" (Qur'ān 6:151; 17:31). Such convictions about human life led all three traditions to reject infanticide and abandonment. Rejection of both male and female infanticide was contrary to its acceptance in various cultural contexts in which these three traditions emerged, such as under Roman law or among some polytheistic Arab tribes.

All three traditions also value the education of children and the obligation of adults to teach or instruct children in the faith. For example, the verses from Deuteronomy 6 cited above continue with the words, which are also included in the *Shema*, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:6–7). In the New Testament, believers are commanded to bring up children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). In the Qur'ān, child education is emphasized in several passages, including the popular *Surah Luqman* (Qur'ān 31:12–20). In all three traditions, instructing children and initiating them in the faith takes place through study, prayer, and participation in central religious rituals and practices both at home and in the religious community. Jews, for example, teach children God's Torah in its widest sense, help them to participate in major and minor Jewish holidays, and prepare them for bar/bat mitzvah. Although Christians disagree on when and how people should be baptized, on who should participate in communion, and how to read the Bible, baptism, communion, and reading the Bible are central Christian practices that shape all Christian understandings of child-rearing. Muslims also have particular approaches to teaching the Qur'ān and integrating children into central Muslim practices, such as daily prayers and fasting.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also outline obligations not only to one's own children or the children of one's religious community but also to children in need. They recognize the particular vulnerability and potential victimization of children, especially the poor or orphans, and outline