

Minding Children in the Study of Liturgy: Philosophical Reflections on Children as Religious Practitioners

FAITH GLAVEY PAWL

University of St. Thomas

pawl0789@stthomas.edu

Abstract: Recent interest in philosophy of religion on religious practice more generally, and liturgical rituals in particular, opens up new avenues for thinking about the religious lives of young children. In this article I consider what it means to say that young children are part of a worshipping assembly, and in what ways they might count as exemplary religious practitioners. There is very little discussion of the religious experiences and practices of children in the philosophy of religion, and I argue that this lacuna should be addressed. Taking cues from Nicholas Wolterstorff and Terence Cuneo's work on the philosophy of liturgy, I make the case that young children can and do participate fully in the liturgical rituals of Christian communities. I draw on the work of religious educators Sofia Cavaletti and Jerome Berryman to illustrate what the religious world of the child looks like, and to make the case that there are respects in which children are at an advantage over adults in participating in the liturgical life of the church.

Keywords: Children, Liturgy, Religious Practice, Religious Education, Ecclesiology

1. Introduction

How should we understand the Gospel passages where Jesus tells his disciples that in order to see the kingdom of heaven, they must enter like little children?¹ Early commentators interpreted stories of Jesus' interactions with children as proposing childlike traits like trust, humility, or innocence as worthy of imitation by adults.²

¹ See Matthew 18:3. See also and Luke 9:48.

² See, for instance, Jerome and John Chrysostom's glosses on Matthew 18:3 in the *Catena Aura* of Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas 2014)

Contemporary interpreters suggest that these stories have less to do with any characteristics of children themselves, and more to do with children's low social status in Jesus' day. Jesus was inverting social scripts to show that what matters in the eyes of the world is not necessarily what matters in the kingdom of God.³ I am not in a position to weigh in on the best way to interpret the texts, but inspired by them, I want to make a case for the importance of thinking about the religious lives of young children in philosophy of religion, especially in the budding area of philosophy of liturgy. There is much we can learn about the nature of religious experience and practice, and about some of the shortcomings of analytic philosophy of religion in general, by paying attention to religion's youngest practitioners. I will make this case by focusing on the following two questions: what does it mean that young children are part of a worshipping assembly, and in what respects, if any, might children be exemplary as religious practitioners?

Most religious people started out that way as children. The actual demographic story is far more complicated than this, of course, but among people who identify as religious in adulthood, the majority were raised in religious households.⁴ Though many people leave the religion of their youth in adulthood, or convert, or move this way or that into different religious denominations or streams, the truth is that the majority of people who are *still* religious as adults were socialized into religion starting early on. Religion is something people tend to grow up with, and if they remain, grow into; and the practice of religion looks very different across different phases of the lifecycle. However, there is virtually no attention to the religious belief or practice of children in analytic philosophy of religion.

Recent interest among philosophers in the topic of religious practice more broadly, and in liturgical ritual in particular, opens up new avenues for thinking about the religious lives of the young. To explore those avenues, I will first highlight the difficulty in thinking of children as religious practitioners. I will then offer some suggestions about why children are overlooked in philosophical treatments of religion, and give some reasons why we ought to pay more attention to the religious lives of the young. After that I will outline aspects of recent philosophical work on

³ See, for instance, Craig Keener's *IVP Matthew Commentary* (Keener 1997), Anna Case–Winters' *Matthew a Theological Commentary* (220) (Case–Winters 2015). For an in–depth look at the figure of the child in the New Testament, See James M.M. Francis' *Adults as Children* (Francis 2006). Francis considers interpretations of the sort I mention, but argues also for a third possibility, that childhood is an image of discipleship, and what Jesus meant to convey is the need for obedient reception of the Gospel message and radical change of heart, symbolized by the radical change that would be involved in becoming a little child again (147 ff). I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to Francis' exhaustive study.

⁴ (Pew Research Center 2016).

liturgical ritual from Nicholas Wolterstorff and Terence Cuneo that sheds light on how we might think of religious practice among children and connect themes from their work with reflections on the religious lives of children from two influential religious educators, Sofia Cavaletti and Jerome Berryman. I then draw on resources from developmental psychology on the imaginative play in early childhood to show what is unique about the way children participate in liturgy. My goal is to re-center philosophical discussions of liturgy on the smallest worshippers, for just a moment, to see how such a shift might deepen our understanding of the nature and purpose of liturgical rituals. Since this is uncharted territory in philosophy of religion, what I write here is just a first pass.

Two caveats are in order. The first is that my focus is limited to Christian traditions, because those are the ones I know best, though I suspect that there are parallel lessons to be drawn from thinking about the religious lives of children in other faith traditions as well. I am intentionally drawing from an ecumenical range of Christian sources, though my own sensibilities about liturgy and religious education are no doubt shaped by my own tradition, Roman Catholicism.

The second caveat is that I will restrict my attention to young children, for the most part between the ages of three and six. This might seem arbitrarily narrow, but there are two benefits to looking at children in this range. The first is that the religious educators I look to for thick descriptions of the religious lives of children work with children in these particular, formative years. The second benefit is that by looking to younger subjects, I am able to put more pressure on assumptions about the role of rationality and religious understanding in competent participation in liturgy than would be possible were I to consider older children and adolescents as well.

2. Sharpening the Questions

In some ways, thinking of young children as religious practitioners is fairly straightforward. Many young children say prayers, receive religious education, and go through various rites of initiation into their respective worshipping communities. They go to religious services just like anyone else (perhaps by their own choice, perhaps because their parents make them). As rates of religious disaffiliation continue to increase in North America and Europe, religious participation drops off for significant swaths of the population as children transition into adulthood, so for an increasing number of people, the experience of religious practice is limited to

childhood.⁵ Furthermore, psychologists like Justin Barrett argue that children are primed to have religious beliefs, especially about the existence of a super-human agent responsible for the created world, regardless of whether they are brought up in religious households.⁶ If anything, children seem to be naturally spiritual, if not outright religious.

On the other hand, there is something puzzling about the idea of the child as a religious practitioner in the context of the communal practice of religion, especially in the space of liturgical rituals. Liturgies consist of scripts that trade in highly idiomatic speech and gesture. Children often have a minimal grasp of the propositional content of what is being said, read, and sung in religious services. In early childhood they lack the ability to grasp the abstract concepts deployed in religious discourse. Their limited executive functioning makes it hard for them to sustain attention through a liturgy, and they can be restless, distracted, and in many cases rather distracting in liturgical space. It would seem that children and adults are doing very different things when they are gathered together as a worshipping assembly.

Consider, however, the view of liturgical theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, who says “Children penetrate more easily than adults into the world of ritual, of liturgical symbolism. They feel and appreciate the ‘atmosphere of worship.’ The experience of the Holy, of that ‘*mysterium tremendum*’ which is at the root of all religion...is more accessible to our children than it is to us” (Schmemmann, 16). Likewise Sofia Cavaletti, speaking of the task of listening to the proclamation of the Gospel, says “Listening is the leaning toward others, the opening of ourselves in a receptive attitude toward the reality around us; it is only the capacity to listen that keeps us from revolving around ourselves. As for the child, we think that there is no age when the person is more capable of listening than in early childhood” (Cavaletti, 49–50).

Are Schmemmann and Cavaletti right, that at least in some ways, children are at an *advantage* when it comes to participating in liturgy, or are they merely romanticizing childhood? The puzzle here can be expressed as a triad of premises, each initially plausible, but inconsistent when conjoined:

- (1) In order to participate meaningfully in liturgy, one must understand the propositional content of what is expressed in liturgy.

⁵ To wit, many critics of religion call religion a childish stage that one must outgrow in order to be enlightened. For data on disaffiliation, see (Pew Research Center 2016, 2019) and (Bullivant 2019).

⁶ (Barrett 2011).

- (2) Children lack the requisite understanding of the propositional content of liturgies.
- (3) Children are exemplary participants in liturgy.

There are a few ways to remove the inconsistency in the triad above. One would be to affirm each premise, but deny that children participate meaningfully in liturgical enactments, even if they are exemplars in some sense, which adults should nevertheless emulate. However, this deflates what is being claimed in (3). If there is some non-trivial respect in which children are better at worship than adults in some respects, or are uniquely disposed to worship well, then it seems their participation in communal worship is *meaningful*. One hallmark of liturgical activity is that it conveys meaning in ways that are centrally important for those who participate in it. Liturgy allows individuals and communities to make sense of who they are, who they take God to be, where they have come from, and what truths are most important. We should expect that children would be able to advance in these forms of understanding if they are in fact exemplary as worshippers.⁷

The inconsistency could also be removed by rejecting one of the premises. The truth of (2) depends on what counts as the requisite level of understanding of propositional content. However, on its face (2) seems highly plausible. Liturgical speech and gesture are complex, and the propositional content of what is expressed in Christian liturgies is difficult to understand. Many of the assertions made in creeds, hymns, and prayers deal with abstractions and nuances beyond a young child's comprehension. Yes, children can sometimes astonish us with profound insight into difficult questions. And as Cavaletti claims from her experience with children, "in the religious sphere, it is a fact that children know things no one has told them" (42). But what is important here is the comparative advantage adults would seem to have over children in general when it comes to understanding liturgy. After all, the puzzle is about the claim that adults should learn from children, and part of what generates perplexity is that children often understand so much less than adults.

⁷ It would be helpful to have a more precise formulation of what I mean by "meaningful participation," but I fear that the kinds of speech acts that constitute liturgical activity can be meaningful in numerous ways, making it difficult to find one definition that captures them all. Since I want to argue that liturgies allow participants to engage God in a second-personal way, the most salient kind of meaningfulness I am after is the kind that might characterize the sort of speech acts that transpire in interpersonal communication and the kind of knowledge one has as a result of such communication. The things I believe and say about my father are meaningful because they express what I take to be true about who my father was and how we related to one another, and our communication was meaningful because it carried significance and built genuine relationship.

In my view, the best candidate to reject is premise (1). I will argue in what follows that the relationship between propositional understanding and meaningful participation is not so straightforward, and that one can participate meaningfully in a liturgy without understanding all of what is going on. I will also give some reason to doubt the truth of premise (2) by considering the role of early childhood religious education in the development of religious understanding. I will also make the case that premise (3) is literally true, and I will suggest some ways we might think of children as exemplary. But before I can present those reasons, I want to reflect some on the absence of attention to children in philosophy of religion and suggest some reasons why this problem should be rectified.

3. Motivating a focus on Liturgy and Children

Nicholas Wolterstorff and Terence Cuneo both puzzle over how little attention is paid in analytic philosophy of religion to one of the central features of religious life — the practice of communal worship. As they see things, philosophers of religion seem most concerned with giving an account of the content and evidential status of religious belief, where belief is understood as assent to propositions about God and God's relations to the world. Philosophy of Religion in the last four decades has been mostly preoccupied with questions about the metaphysical puzzles that arise from the claims of theism and the epistemology of religious belief, at least in the Anglo-American context. What has been ignored, Wolterstorff and Cuneo point out, is the significance of religious practice itself. Cuneo raises the concern that,

...much of the discussion in contemporary philosophy of religion is detached from the religious life in such a way that it threatens to offer a distorted picture of what is important to this way of life. A corollary is that contemporary philosophy of religion has largely failed to deepen our understanding of what it is to be a religiously committed agent and how one ought to be such an agent. A consequence, I believe, is that we do not understand crucial components of lived religious life as well as we should. (Cuneo 2016, 6)

Ideally, religious people live out their belief systems by adhering to the ethic internal to their faith. And in addition to (or perhaps as part of) their ethical dimensions, religious traditions also call for what must seem to the alien observer a most puzzling pattern of behavior. Religious folk gather to engage in communal rituals of worship.

Motivated by a desire to do justice to forms of religious life as they are actually lived, both Cuneo and Wolterstorff make the case that analytic philosophy of

religion can and ought to turn its attention to communal rituals of worship, to the subject of liturgy. They admirably demonstrate in their own treatment of the subject the philosophical fruit of such a turn. To their observation about the lacuna regarding religious practice, I would add that according to analytic philosophy of religion, the paradigmatic religious believer/practitioner is a neurotypical, rational, and probably highly educated adult. Perhaps focusing on the idealized rational agent is understandable for our advancing the epistemology of religion. However, limiting study in this way obscures the fact that the individuals filling places of worship the world over are incredibly diverse, intellectually and otherwise. This diversity raises interesting questions for the study of liturgy, as liturgy is both fundamentally communal and norm governed.

Liturgical practice involves following norms laid out in liturgical scripts (more on that below), and the range of intellectual and physical abilities for satisfying those norms varies widely among any assembled group. To put it differently, there are 'rules' for liturgy, and whether or not what a person says or does will count as appropriate liturgical participation will depend at least to some extent on whether they adhere to the rules. You have to have at least some sense of what you are doing, and why, in order to participate meaningfully in what is happening. It makes sense, then, to ask whether those in the assembly who are *not* idealized rational subjects somehow participate less fully in the worship of the gathered assembly.

There are many reasons why it makes sense to focus on children in this context. The first, and what I hope would be most obvious, is that children are people and are valuable, and aspects of their religious lives are philosophically and theologically important in their own right. Too often we treat children as incomplete humans-in-progress, irrelevant to our explorations of question of philosophical and theological importance. If we intend to be more inclusive in the practice of philosophy of religion, we ought to pay attention to diversity of age and consider whether our assumptions about the relevance of children's experiences reveal biases we have against the young.

The second motivation for thinking about the religious lives of young children is the one mentioned in the introduction. Most Christians were made in Sunday School classrooms, confirmation classes, or backyard Bible clubs. Reading lots of philosophy of religion, one gets the impression that the average Christian is some blank slate of an adult who woke up one morning and converted upon reading the modal ontological argument for God's existence. Or perhaps he looked across a beautiful vista and had his *sensus divinitatis* tickled, and voila, he became a Christian. But in reality, most people's religious identities are formed over the gradual accumulation of lots of experiences, under the influence of members of their

families, communities and peer groups, over a long span of time. So even if the primary goal of philosophy of religion were just to consider the rationality of religious belief, it would still make sense to pay attention to the realistic conditions under which religious commitments are actually formed.

On a closely related note, it is hard to overstate how formative the experience of religion in childhood can be on an adult's belief and practice, for better or for worse. For religious people introducing their own children and the children in their churches to their liturgical traditions, it is important to think hard about best practice. This is both a practical matter of considering what forms of pedagogy are best suited to the aims of helping children's spiritual development, and also an ethical matter of considering how best to teach children in a way that respects their needs and autonomy and protects their welfare.⁸ And it is fair to ask whether we have the right in the first place to raise children religiously and initiate them into liturgical practices. Even if the answer is yes, that's a position that needs a defense. Philosophical reflection on children's experiences in this domain might go some way, at least, toward aiding these practical and ethical considerations.

Finally, one consequence of widening the focus of philosophical attention to include both religious practice and children is that it increases space for reflective distance wherein philosophers of religion, especially in the analytic tradition, can reevaluate the extent to which our philosophical anthropology is dominated by concerns about rationality. My point is not that we must demote the importance of intellect and will in the way we conceive of the religious dimensions of human nature, but rather that we can consider ways in which other facets of our humanity might be neglected in our treatment of religion. Focusing on children allows just such an opportunity. What is important about religious life as it's lived on the ground for those who do not or cannot (yet) think about God in abstract, symbolic terms? What role do affect and social perception play in the process of spiritual growth? Is it a mistake to think that the normal (and normative) trajectory of religious development in a person's life is one of linear progress? The answers we might find to these questions could in turn shed light on how we understand the religious experiences of humans in other stages of life, as well as people of all ages with intellectual disabilities.

⁸ I focus in this essay on religious education where things go well. This is a far more cheerful subject than what other scholars are very helpfully bringing to the table concerning the effects of childhood religious trauma. See Michelle Panchuk's excellent and sobering work on this topic (Panchuk 2018).

4. Gleaning Insight from the new Philosophy of Liturgy

In *Acting Liturgically*, Wolterstorff characterizes liturgy as a specific kind of communal scripted activity. The script provided by a liturgy tells participants what to do by giving a sequence of act-types that furnish the activity with normativity. The act-types are not just words that participants ought to say, but also gestures they should make and postures they should assume. It is a whole-bodied phenomenon. In liturgies, participants “keep silence, play musical instruments, stand, sit, kneel, bow, prostrate themselves, process, dance, get out of their seats and walk forward, return to their seats, cross themselves, fold their hands...” and so on (Wolterstorff, 25). The kinds of act-types spelled out in liturgies vary across traditions, but all forms of Christian worship, he claims, engage in liturgy. “This is true even of the Quakers on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. Each person is to meditate in silence until he or she feels moved to by the Spirit to say or sing something; the others are to listen attentively” (12).

What distinguishes liturgical activity from other kinds of communal scripted activity is its purpose. Liturgy is most closely associated with worshiping and adoring God, and involves other modes of engaging with God too, like listening and petitioning. According to Wolterstorff, “Christian liturgical enactments are for the purpose of learning and acknowledging the excellence of who God is and what God has done” (29). The kind of liturgical learning and acknowledgement he describes is not abstract or impersonal, but second-personal interaction with God.

In following a liturgical script, a participant’s actions and words take on what Wolterstorff calls “counting-as” significance. “Raising one’s hand at a certain point in an auction counts as placing a bid on the item being auctioned,” Wolterstorff explains (23–24), and in like fashion, actions performed according to a liturgical script count as instances of various ways of engaging God. Bowing or kneeling count as acts of adoration, raising one’s hands can count as an act of thanking or supplicating God. Uttering a prayer can count as an act of confession, and so forth. A liturgical action counts as an instance of worship, in part, to the extent the participant is following the script.

Because liturgical activity follows a script, participants lay aside their autonomy in a way, coming to the liturgy, “prepared to suspend for a time acting on their own judgments as to what would be good to do and instead follow the liturgical script” (Wolterstorff 18). One of the most important functions of such suspension of private judgment is that it allows a group of individuals to act together in concert. By setting aside their own plans for how to act in the communal space of the liturgy,

participants are able to act collectively in learning and acknowledging the excellence of God.⁹

One consequence of the collective nature of liturgical action is that knowledge about how best to perform what's prescribed by a script, and what the various elements of the script even mean, is going to be distributed unevenly across the assembly. Wolterstorff argues though that just as lay people can rely on the expertise of scientists to certify the meaning of the scientific terms they employ, participants in the liturgy can likewise depend on liturgical experts to certify the meaning of elements of the liturgical script. Borrowing the notion of linguistic division of labor from Hilary Putnam, he explains

There are members of the scientific community who know what a Higgs boson is. When I say to my wife, 'Physicists have discovered the Higgs boson,' the term 'Higgs Boson' stands for whatever it is that the experts refer to when they use that term. There is a division of linguistic labor between me and those experts in the use of the term 'Higgs boson.'" There is likewise a division of linguistic labor among those who are members of a liturgical tradition.... Liturgical traditions and their corresponding communities are paradigmatic examples of the division of linguistic labor. That makes it possible to perform acts of worship while having only the vaguest idea of what those acts are (43).

He goes on to say that the participant who does not know the relevant liturgical idioms can expand and deepen her knowledge with practice and can "grow into the liturgy" (44).

This process of "growing into the liturgy," plays a prominent role in Terence Cuneo's account of the kind of knowledge that is gained by participation in the liturgy. In *Ritualized Faith*, Cuneo argues that when someone participates in liturgy, the point is not to grow in propositional knowledge about God, but to grow in a special kind of practical know-how that is not reducible to propositional knowledge. One develops a certain kind of skill. Though the liturgy is not for the purpose of conveying this skill (it's for the purpose of praising God), religious know-how is the natural product of participation in liturgy. What participants learn how to do in a liturgy, Cuneo argues, is how to engage God: how to bless God,

⁹ In ceding authority to the liturgical scripts this way, participants acknowledge a sort of authority to the traditions out of which those scripts were developed. The source and kind of authority will vary across traditions according to their various ecclesiologies. In other words, different communities will have different stories to tell about why they ought to follow the scripts they do, and what it is that makes certain ways of worshiping better than others. I'm grateful to Mark Taylor for raising concerns about this issue.

entreat God, praise God, thank God, confess to God, etc. In short, they are building up the means to be able to relate to God in a second-personal way.¹⁰

Cuneo limits his discussion of liturgical know-how to what he calls competent participants, whom he describes as “those who are sufficiently familiar with the performance-plan of the liturgy and the character of the core narrative” (77). He doubts that young children are competent participants. He says,

It is one thing to perform an action that counts as expressing thanks; it is another to know how to do so. In the context of Eastern liturgies, small children perform actions such as kissing a copy of the Gospels and eating the eucharistic meal. Arguably, in that context, their actions count as cases of offering thanks to God. But these children do not know how to thank God by kissing a copy of the Gospels (158).

Here Cuneo claims that it is possible for a child’s action to count as an act of thanksgiving, even if the child does not know how to give thanks. But why think that children do not know how to give thanks? Cuneo presumably thinks this because they lack knowledge of the performance-plan of the liturgy and the character of the core narrative. But this judgment, I would argue, might be hasty.

First consider knowledge of the performance-plan. Developing liturgical know-how is partly constituted by learning what goes on in a liturgical script and figuring out how to enact those speech and act types for oneself. As Wolterstorff explains, “Full participation in some liturgical enactment requires practical know-how: knowing how and when to perform the scripted actions. It’s not a know-how one is born with, nor is it a know-how one acquires automatically as one matures. It’s a learned know-how... To acquire the relevant know-how one has to be inducted into the social practice” (Wolterstorff 23). Children and adults must be taught how to do liturgy.

Depending on the complexity of the liturgical forms in which one is participating, the learning curve can be more or less steep. You have to learn when to stand, when to kneel, and when to sit down. You have to learn when to raise your hands or dance, and when to be quiet and reflective. In my own experience of converting to Catholicism as an adult, I had to learn how to genuflect, how far to bow before communion, and how far to stick my fingers into a holy water font. Children learn these things too. When my children were very young and learning how to make the

¹⁰ Cuneo himself does not spell this out in terms of second-personal knowledge, except to say that what one learns is how to engage God, and it would be interesting to compare what he says about know-how more systematically with discussions of what is sometimes called Franciscan knowledge or knowledge of persons.

sign of the cross, it was hard to tell if they were third base coaches flagging the runner on to second, or if they are inventing some new heresy about number of persons in the trinity. But they tried, and their actions looked at least something like what they saw others around them doing. I would argue children can have at least partial knowledge of the performance–plan of a liturgy, so long as they have sufficient experience attending liturgies. They might need prompting from the more experienced participants around them, but like most kinds of know–how, I would suggest that liturgical know–how comes in degrees.

Besides just learning what to do and say at the right time in liturgical contexts, one must also grow in understanding of what is going on, and why. While I would concede that children have a weaker grasp of the character of the core narrative of Christianity than adults might, I think young children can and often do understand *enough* about what is happening in the liturgy, and the bigger story of which that liturgy is a part, to exhibit the relevant kind of know how. Consider the example Cuneo uses of kissing the Gospels as an instance of giving thanks. If the actions called for in the liturgical script are explained to children in terms they can understand, then why wouldn't they know how to give thanks by kissing the Gospels? The Gospels are God's words to God's people, and God's people are grateful that God speaks to them. We think that children know how to express gratitude in other contexts, sometimes by kissing their loved ones to say thanks. So why would an instance of kissing the Gospels to give thanks to God be any different?

Describing the development of liturgical know–how in adults, Cuneo argues that the process involves a complex set of intellectual, affective, and volitional changes a person undergoes. Part of this transformation, Cuneo argues, is achieved through the narrative elements of liturgy. Many liturgies involve imaginative reenactments of stories from the Bible where congregants speak in the first person, as if they were present for various episodes in the life of Jesus. This is not mere play–acting. This process of taking up a vantage point from within a narrative in liturgical context allows a person to see themselves as part of the broader narrative of salvation history, and it shapes their understanding of their own lives as part of that broader narrative. Cuneo asks,

What might be the purpose of immersing oneself in the core narrative in this way? The short answer, I believe, is that immersion in liturgical action is in the service of receptivity and appropriation. The dominant purpose of immersion is to let participants open themselves up to and appropriate the riches of the narrative, often by identifying with its characters in such a way that they construct and revise their narrative identities. (87)

By helping participants to receive and appropriate the core elements of the stories in liturgies, the narrative elements of liturgy become salient to the participants' own life experience. But Cuneo notes, it can be difficult to allow oneself to be immersed in a narrative. "Needless to say, imaginative engagement of this sort does not come intuitively for many. Participating in liturgical reenactment is as much about training and conditioning as it is about competent engagement" (83-4).

Participating in ritual transforms the participant, and it seems as though this transformation can fly under the radar, so to speak, of the participant's awareness. Cuneo says, "Even when we are children, these rites often shape our sensibilities without our realizing it, helping us to associate God and God's activity with the concrete, the particular, the material, the communal. ...to the extent that these rites do this—so the assumption of the tradition seems to be—these actions could be the sort of thing that brings us into communion with God in ways that are difficult to articulate and that we sometimes do not understand" (203). The process begins, for many, in early childhood. Perhaps this explains why people's experience of religion in childhood has such a profound impact on how they experience religion as adults.

To summarize the insights from Wolterstorff and Cuneo's analyses of liturgy, there are three main points that are applicable to the religious lives of young children. The first is that those in the assembly with limited understanding of what is going on can nevertheless perform those actions meaningfully because the counting—as significance of liturgical actions depends on the collective activity of the community. If children are observing the more knowledgeable people around them and imitating them, then the liturgical "experts" from whom they learn can certify the meaning of the children's actions. Second, liturgical know-how is not something that is reducible to propositional knowledge, and furthermore, is about how to engage God, to have second-personal experience. That know-how is embodied, involving the whole person, and not just the capacity for abstract contemplation. Finally, narrative immersion is a crucial facet of liturgical know-how.

5. Observing the Religious Lives of Small Children

Whether or not children participate meaningfully in the liturgical lives of their churches is actually an empirical question. Philosophers and theologians might have experience being around children, and perhaps memories of their own childhood, which can fill in some of the needed empirical content for answering those questions. However, this kind of common-sense, anecdotal reflection on childhood has its limits. Thinking about the religious world of the child is an exercise in

remembering what childhood was like, and more importantly, in empathetically engaging children to try to see things from their point of view. Both of those tasks involve the difficult work of trying to screen off our adult projections onto our earlier selves and onto the children we seek to understand.

Here the work of Sofia Cavaletti and Jerome Berryman is helpful. Cavaletti was an Italian theologian and Hebrew bible scholar who, along with Gianna Gobbi, developed a Montessori Christian education program for young children called Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS). Cavaletti's model is now practiced in over 65 countries, in thousands of Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Orthodox churches. Berryman, one of Cavaletti's students, went on to develop a similar model in the United States called Godly Play in the 1970's. Godly play is now widely adopted in Protestant churches around the world and has even been adapted for use in Jewish communities as Torah Godly Play.

My point in drawing from the work of Cavaletti and Berryman is not to endorse CGS or Godly Play as best practice, though I do think there is much to commend in both models. Rather, their writings are helpful because their models of religious education are child-focused and child-led and are explicitly aimed at initiating children into the liturgical life of the church. They do not think the task of religious education is to pass on a set of teachings to children or to create some sort of relationship between the child and God. As they see things, children already have a relationship God, and are capable to listening to God's word alongside adults. The role of the adult catechist is to "proclaim a word that is not one's own and assist the child the child's potentialities, which in no way belong to oneself...There is a deep bond uniting God to the child, the Creator to his Creature; it is a bond that cannot be explained as the result of any human work, a bond with which no human should interfere" (Cavaletti 52). In other words, the adult teacher's role is to listen to the word of God alongside children, and to try to stay out of the way of God's work.

Because children are seen in this way in these educational models, adults are thought to have much to learn from children, and children are given a special voice in their work. Berryman says,

Ignoring children in the church is an unrealized defensive act. Children present a powerful challenge to what adults conceive of as spiritual maturity. Jesus was very forthright when speaking about this error, made by his disciples, as well as us. He said that if you want to become spiritually mature, you have to become like a child (Berryman, 8).

Since Berryman and Cavaletti have been so intentional about centering children's voices in the church, they have gathered decades' worth of records of children's own words and artwork about their religious experiences. One promising avenue for future research would be to treat their records, especially Cavaletti's classic, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, as something like sourcebooks for exploring the religious world of the young child.

Both CGS and Godly Play are styled after the educational philosophy of Maria Montessori, who proposed that children learn best in child-centered environments that are carefully prepared in advance to facilitate children's self-directed exploration of the learning material. Montessori herself noted that children have what she called a sensitive period for religion, before the age of six, and both Cavaletti and Berryman endeavored to develop means to create environments rich in religious symbolism in order to give children between the ages of three and six spaces in which they could encounter God. "The catechetical material is not designed to lead to abstraction, but to the vital knowledge of a concrete Person; it does not lead to the consideration of ideas, but to prayer" (Cavaletti 54). Encounter is the main goal.

The Godly Play Room and the CGS atrium, as their respective classrooms are known, are quiet spaces where children complete works that present the core narratives of the Bible and the liturgical life of the church through hands-on activities. The CGS classroom is called the atrium because it is meant to be an intermediary space between the outside world and the church, where the child learns how to be immersed more fully in what is happening in the ritual activity of the church. But what happens in the Godly Play Room and CGS atrium is itself liturgical. The curricula prescribe a ritual script that involves reading of scripture, prayer, music, and time for doing various works on Biblical and Sacramental themes. The purpose of these rituals, to mirror Wolterstorff and Cuneo, is to aid in the learning and acknowledging the excellence of who God is and what God has done, and to allow children to develop know-how for engaging God.¹¹

Citing an example of an activity in the Godly Play room described by Montessori scholar, E.M. Standing, Berryman describes children polishing brass models of a paten and chalice, vessels used in the eucharistic rite. Berryman says of that work, "The first level is physical. The child is merely polishing. At the next level, the child realizes how this polishing preserves the beauty of the cup and plate and how this act helps care for the environment of the classroom. The third level is engaged when

¹¹ I think this point can easily generalize to most other forms of Christian religious education like Sunday School or Vacation Bible clubs too, even if CGS and Godly Play are more explicit about their liturgical character.

the child consciously ponders the meaning of God's presence in Holy Communion while polishing (51)." The very concrete action of polishing terminates in an occasion to contemplate God's intimacy with God's people.

Cavaletti recounts a young boy who seemed fixated on a work involving pouring water in and out of a chalice, coming back to the same work over and over again. The catechist thought the boy was being lazy by repeating this one action over and over again, until she heard the boy say one day staring into the chalice, "a few drops of water and a lot of wine, because we must lose ourselves in Jesus" (Cavaletti 91). There the kid was having some kind of mystical experience and was able to express a deep mystery of the faith in language he did not get from his teachers, while adults thought he was just goofing off.

In another work used in the CGS curriculum, children practice putting priestly vestments in different liturgical colors on small wooden crosses. The work parallels what the children do when they put away their own clothing at home, but also allows them to reflect on what the various colors of vestments stand for—the various seasons of the church year. But at some point, what emerges in the children's consciousness – without verbal instruction from adults—is the image of the priest standing *in persona Christi* at the altar, since the priest's garments are draped over a cross.

Both CGS and Godly Play pay particular attention to parables, and Berryman and Cavaletti report that certain parables have emerged as being particularly attractive to children across their decades of teaching. Of perennial interest is the parable of the Good Shepherd. Cavaletti explains that the image of the Good Shepherd caring for the individual sheep strikes a deep chord in children. The parable is illustrated for the children with the help of a small model of a sheep pen, filled with wooden sheep, with a wooden shepherd at the center. One sheep is lost outside of the sheepfold, and the children take turns bringing the shepherd out to fetch the sheep and bring it back into the fence. The catechist is instructed *not* to tell the children that the shepherd is Jesus and that each one of the children is the beloved sheep. In general, catechists are instructed to keep their words to a minimum. And yet intuitively, the children joyfully make these connections on their own.

Cavaletti thinks this particular parable resonates so consistently with children because it speaks to their deeply felt needs for love and protection (44). Hans Urs von Balthasar makes a similar observation about the religious world of the young child, claiming "So it is with all other attributes native to children: all of them are modeled on the wholesome exchange of love between the primarily giving love of the mother and the primarily received love of the child." (Balthasar 1988, 22). A child's openness to receiving maternal love prefigures and tutors a natural openness

to divine love, and the child delights in playfully contemplating the signs and stories that convey that love to her.

Cavaletti explains that it is easy to miss the depth of what might be going on in children's encounters with God, because evidence of that depth typically comes "with ephemeral moments, like a flash of light that shines vibrantly then fades away" (37). What happens in the heart and mind of the child is a mystery to the adult. She goes on to say "The fact that we are dealing with flashes does not invalidate their importance, because it is proper to the child to live at first in a discontinuous way the riches he possesses, which only gradually and through the aid of the environment later becomes a constant habitus in him" (ibid).

This certainly resonates with what I have witnessed in my own children and godchildren in church. They alternate between fighting with each other for pew space, making weird noises with increasing volume to see if anyone around is looking, and then gazing in amazement at the elevated host. In between asking questions about matters irrelevant to the celebration of the mass, they insist I explain death to them when we recite the mystery of faith, or ask (very loudly) during the eucharistic prayer why only Jesus is present in the eucharist, and not Mary the mother of God, too. They ask theological questions at bedtime about the scripture they heard in church that I would have never guessed they had been thinking of through the day. They connect their emerging understanding of the finality of death with the songs and prayers of Holy Week and the baffling nature of the Resurrection.

What seems clear enough from Berryman and Cavaletti's writing is that children can understand far more than we might think. What they are able to access are the essentials of the faith, in developmentally appropriate terms. They may not be able to pick up on everything that happens in the rich liturgies of their churches, but there are, at least, flashes of comprehension, and what they comprehend is deeply personal and salient to their own life experiences.

6. Resolving the Puzzle

Now that I have outlined some of the insights about liturgy from Wolterstorff and Cuneo and presented a brief glimpse into the religious world of the young child, we are in position to return to the inconsistent triad presented in section II. I will review the initial challenge:

- (1) In order to participate meaningfully in liturgy, one must understand the propositional content of what is expressed in liturgy.
- (2) Children lack the requisite understanding of the propositional content of

liturgies.

(3) Children are exemplary participants in liturgy.

If Wolterstorff is right that a person can participate meaningfully in a liturgy, if her actions can have counting-as significance even if she has “only the vaguest idea” of what those actions are, then we have reason to reject premise (1). Furthermore, it seems plausible that a person can develop liturgical know-how even before he has grasped the propositional content of the liturgical script he is following, so long as he is performing the appropriate action types and has some grasp of the broader core narrative of which that particular rite is a part. And more importantly, since the end of developing know-how is engaging God, it also seems plausible that a person can engage with God second-personally even if her propositional knowledge about God is significantly limited. We think as much is possible in parallel cases of second-person knowledge between human persons. A child can have profound knowledge of who his mother is even if he has limited or mistaken propositional knowledge about her.

I also think that anecdotes that Cavaletti and Berryman share give us some reason to doubt premise (2). Children might not fully grasp the meaning of the statements in the Nicene Creed or the prayers in the Liturgy of the Hours or the Book of Common Prayer. By this I simply mean they might not have many of the words of those texts in their vocabularies, or they may not know what propositional content is ruled out as contrary to the positive affirmations expressed through creeds and prayers. However, children can understand the essential elements of the Gospel message. They can believe that God is real and has really entered into history in the ways described in the narrative elements of the liturgy.

Furthermore, understanding isn't something that one simply comes to possess like water poured into a bucket, but is rather an intellectual virtue that is cultivated and nurtured—both in children and adults. Part of the task of the catechist is to facilitate the development of this understanding in age-appropriate ways. In any event, it is easy to see how we might underestimate children's understanding of their faith, especially as that understanding tends to manifest itself in flashes, as Cavaletti calls them.

Finally, I think there are several respects in which we might see children as exemplary religious practitioners, so we have reasons to think that premise (3) is literally true. The first is that children are much better at narrative immersion than adults are. Children have a much easier time seeing themselves as part of the stories

they hear, like the parable of the Good Shepherd, and they lack the inhibitions adults might have about engaging imaginatively in worship.¹²

One reason to think that children are better than adults at narrative immersion is that very young children are especially at home in the world of imaginative play. Developmental psychologists have long stressed the importance of imaginative play for the cognitive development of the child. One pioneer of research in this tradition, Lev Vygotsky, theorized that play is essential for the growth of the child because it allows the child to engage in activity that is intrinsically rewarding, which at the same time allows the young child to grow in self-regulation and the ability to discover meaning through her interaction with her peers (Vygotsky 2017).

In his 1966 lecture, “Play and its role in the mental development of the child,” Vygotsky explains that imaginative play, where children take on particular roles and act out imaginary situations, is pleasurable only when children are able to stick to the rules internal to the roles that are undertaken. The child playing a mother must stick to the rules of maternal behavior. The child playing doctor must do the sorts of things that doctors do, and the child playing the patient has to act like someone in need of the doctor’s help. They must do so not because their parents or teachers tells them to, but because they want to. If children do not stick to the script, the imagined world does not work, and the game is not nearly as much fun. Anyone who has observed young children negotiating the roles and rules for playtime with each other knows that such planning is serious business, and often lasts longer than the game itself.

Imaginative play serves as a scaffold that allows children to develop new skills in what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development—a context in which a child makes developmental advances that outstretch what he would accomplish outside of that context. “In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour” (18).

To see what Vygotsky means by this, consider what he has to say about the development of self-regulation. What is remarkable about preschool aged children and imaginative play is that in the context of the game, children are much better at self-regulation than they are outside of that context. Children are much better at following rules and controlling their impulses within imagined scenarios than they

¹² Here the work of Amber Griffioen on the role of imagination in religious experience is very helpful (Griffioen 2016).

are in real life ones because the rewards for playing games well are immediate, internal to the activity itself. Thus, as children engage in imaginative play, they gain agential control over themselves and are better able to explore various social roles and the ways that mutual understanding are negotiated in the give and take that happens between peers.

Not only is imaginative play a zone of proximal development for self-regulation, but also for deepening the capacity to understand language and objects. In imaginative play children learn to separate objects from the words that signify them, and to use other objects to stand in the place of those objects. A stick can be a horse, a block can be a truck, a cup can be a stethoscope. In play, external things lose their motivating force. The child sees one thing but

acts differently in relation to what he sees. Thus, a situation is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees... Action in a situation that is not seen, but only conceived mentally in an imaginary field (i.e., an imaginary situation), teaches the child to guide his behaviour not only by immediate perception of objects or by the situation immediately affecting him but also by the meaning of this situation. (Vygotsky, 12)

Thus, a child's ability to make sense of the world she inhabits is accelerated in the context of imaginative play.

The period during which imaginative play features so prominently in typically developing children is the rather narrow window of the preschool years. This fits nicely with Montessori's hypothesis that there is a sensitive period for a child's religious sensibilities in this window. Children learn through play and story, which dispose them to engage in narrative immersion with ease. If as Cuneo argues, narrative immersion allows participants to "open themselves up to and appropriate the riches of the narrative, often by identifying with its characters in such a way that they construct and revise their narrative identities," (Cuneo, 87) children would seem to have a natural advantage in these aspects of the liturgy. Recall that children immersed in the parable of the Good Shepherd can easily identify with the lost sheep, even without any prodding from the catechist.

Vygotsky's description of imaginative play and development in young children lends it itself to an admittedly speculative analogy that might lend more support to premise (3). Liturgical scripts might be a kind of scaffold for spiritual development, both for young children and for adults, and liturgies themselves a zone of proximal development. The unique context of communal worship might allow participants to gain know-how for engaging God that is otherwise much more difficult to attain in

other contexts. Just as the rules of imaginative play allow children to attain the goods intrinsic to play and grow affectively and intellectually, the norms laid out in liturgical scripts might play a very similar role in the participant's ability to make sense of the world described in the narratives of the liturgy and to understand her place in that world by following the liturgical script.¹³ And children, it seems, have a leg up here.

The second advantage, mentioned by Schmemmann in the introduction, is that children seem to be much more comfortable living with mystery. So much of the world is mysterious to the child that they have a natural kind of epistemic humility just in virtue of their limited life experience. The child has an advantage over those adults who suppose that they have adequate grasp of the propositional content of liturgies, because those adults fail to see the limits of their own understanding. Cavaletti quotes Leo the Great, saying, "On the subject of divine things, he who believes he has already found does not find what he is looking for, and has searched in vain" (158). While children may exhibit over-confidence in some of their beliefs, it does seem that they are able to sit in contemplation of the mysteries of the faith, to ask questions over and over again, to hear the same stories, and to be open to the possibility that what they know of reality is not the whole story.

Lastly, if young children do indeed have a critical period of religious sensitivity in early childhood as Montessori, Cavaletti, and their followers believe, and the experience of maternal love mediates early experiences of divine love as Balthasar suggests, then children might naturally be primed to be more receptive to encounter with the divine. Their felt needs for love and security incline their hearts to be open before God, ready for engaging God through simple acts of thanksgiving and praise.

If children are exemplary as worshippers, at least in these ways, how should adults then emulate them? What practical steps can Christians take to follow Jesus' exhortation to become like children? I would provisionally suggest that rather than trying to pick out particular childlike traits and work to inculcate the habits that manifest them, worshippers might have an easier time if they simply spend more time listening to children. If congregants pay attention to children, invite them to

¹³ Some liturgical theologians of the last century stressed that liturgy itself is a form of play, insofar as there are no extrinsic goals to liturgy, and the rules of liturgical scripts open up a kind of freedom of contemplation for participants. See in particular Guardini (1935), Ratzinger (2000), and von Hildebrand (2016). Though I think this way of describing the character of liturgy is both helpful and apt, I want to avoid the playfulness of liturgy for present purposes because it brings up difficult questions concerning realism and fictionalism about religious discourse that complicate the account of liturgy I've sketched here. I am grateful to Eric Yang for helping me see how much thornier these issues are than I'd initially imagined.

share what they are learning and experiencing in church, and focus on their needs in communal life, then aspects of the religious lives of young children might become contagious. Empathic engagement with children, and with *all* the diverse members of a worshipping assembly, can enrich each participants ability to enter into the richness of liturgical practice.

In his study of the philosophical abilities of children, Gareth Matthews makes a similar point about the value of having conversations about deep matters with young children.

The adult has a better command of the language than the child, and, latently anyway, a surer command of the concepts expressed in the language. But it is the child who has fresh eyes and ears for perplexity and incongruity. And children typically have a degree of candor and spontaneity that is hard for the adult to match. Since each party has something important to contribute, the inquiry can easily become a genuinely joint venture, something otherwise rather rare in adult encounters with children" (Matthews 1979, 368).

Liturgical activity is similarly a joint venture. Welcoming the little children and becoming like them, I would suggest, are integrally connected. And perhaps, one must not only become like a little child (in some respects) to grow in spiritual maturity through the practice of liturgy, but theologians and philosophers of religion might want to imitate children (in some respects) too.

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