

Talking Theodicy with Children without Arresting their Theological Thinking

Jerome W. Berryman
Center for the Theology of Childhood
Houston, Texas, USA

God-talk about evil with children requires great art. This is because it can unintentionally arrest the growth of their theological thinking at an early age. To explore this problem “theodicy” will be briefly defined and then the mechanism that can limit cognitive growth will be described. The primary danger points for arrested growth during early, middle, and late childhood will then be examined.

INTRODUCTION

Why did God kill the children in the flood? They hadn’t done anything. What about their pets, the little dogs and cats? Why did God kill the Pharaoh’s soldiers during the Exodus? They were only doing what Pharaoh told them to do. Why did God tell Abraham to kill his son? Why did Abraham and Isaac kill the ram caught in the bushes instead of freeing him? Why did God let people kill *his* Son? Children often ask such questions when they are comfortable with their teachers and the community of children they are part of and may even ask them in threatening situations because they are so urgent. This means that children think about theodicy more than most adults notice. Talking theodicy with children in an appropriate way, then, needs more care than is generally realized in Christian education.

THEODICY

The word “theodicy” is a blend from the Greek words for “God” and “justice.” This combination of words points to the effort to explain how God can be all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing and yet allow evil to exist in the world.

The best answer to such questions for children (and perhaps adults) is probably to say with humility and love, “I don’t know.” It is also good to add, “I have wondered about that every since I was your age. I don’t know why God allows evil in the world, but I do know that God loves you and me, even when things go wrong.”

Some philosophers like Spinoza (1632-1677) have argued that evil only *seems* to appear in a perfect world, because we lack God’s perspective. Others like Leibniz (1646-1716) have argued that the world is the best balance possible between freedom and evil. Freedom is necessary, because a choice to be good without it is not significant. Still, for most people a rational theodicy does not take one very far toward understanding and coping with evil in an emotionally satisfying way. Narrative and nonverbal communication need to be tended to when talking theodicy with children, but the focus here is on discussions that involve a reasonable theodicy. This is especially interesting, because what is “reasonable” for children changes during early, middle, and late childhood. We turn now to the mechanism by which arrested theological thought can take place.

THE MECHANISM THAT ARRESTS THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

The fundamental mechanism that arrests theological thinking is an “interlocking” between the cognitive developmental structures preferred during the three primary periods of childhood and the logic of doctrinal explanation that they hear in church and educational settings. Some of this hearing is really “over-hearing,” when children are actually listening in while the adults talk about theodicy.

The interlock takes place in three steps. First, there is an attraction between the doctrinal logic and the child’s latest and most useful cognitive, developmental preference.

Secondly, an attachment, a kind of structural fit, between the doctrinal and developmental logic takes place. Thirdly the attachment becomes fixed so that it limits the ability of children to think in new ways about theodicy. This makes their theological thinking dependent on the memory of the fit and will to make it useful rather than associating theological thinking with the creative process so that new ways of thinking and new experiences can be incorporated into the child's view of theodicy.

Artful teaching is the remedy for arrested theological development. It provides the permission and the stimulus to think in creative ways about theodicy so that such thinking becomes associated with personal meaning rather than with the memorized statements of others and the will to use them to make meaning. When the stimulus for creative thinking is provided from within the Christian language system --- sacred stories, liturgical action, parables, and deep contemplative silence --- children remain grounded in the Christian Tradition even though their thinking is open and flexible. Stimulating personal thinking about evil can disrupt the habit of using the logical interlock in a thoughtless way and challenge children to grow in their theological thought. What, then, are the primary danger points to be cautious about during early, middle, and late childhood to avoid arresting children's theological thinking?

AN EARLY CHILDHOOD DANGER POINT

Early childhood is a time when children's thinking is generally self-centric so that their personal feelings and thoughts seem to them to influence the world in unexplained ways. This "limitation," at least from the point of view of adult thinking, comes largely from the inability to take a different perspective from one's own.

The self-centric view of early childhood was discovered, or at least first described formally, by Jean Piaget in his first book, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1959), published in French in 1923. He wrote, “Conversation between children is therefore not sufficient at first to take the speakers out of their ego-centrism, because each child, whether he is trying to explain his own thoughts or to understand those of others, is shut up in his own point of view” (Piaget 1959, 113). The ego-centrism concept has been questioned, but it is clear that younger children do differ generally from older children in the ability to take a perspective other than their own.

Before the age of about 7 or 8 children are not very interested in another’s perspective, because they can’t put themselves in another person’s shoes. This is why Piaget also wrote that during this early period “understanding between children occurs only in so far as there is contact between two identical mental schemas already existing in each child” (Piaget 1959, 133).

Self-centrism sometimes causes pain and suffering. Children might angrily feel that they want an irritating neighbor to “go away.” If the neighbor goes to the hospital, dies, or departs in some other way, then the child, who vaguely wanted something like that to happen, might experience a guilty sadness that is sometimes difficult for adults to understand, because they have grown out of their magical thinking except, perhaps, when they are under threat.

Such magical thinking, as we said above, is in part related to perspective taking. In *The Language and Thought of the Child* Piaget described children re-telling stories or making explanations in a way that showed this limitation, but a later experiment was more dramatic (Piaget 1932, Piaget and Inhelder 1968). Children were asked to walk

around a model of three mountains and then to stop and look at the model. After a doll was placed “viewing the mountains” from another angle the children were asked what the mountains looked like from the doll’s perspective. They were given pictures of the mountains to choose from and young children were most likely to pick the picture of the mountains as they appeared from where they were standing rather than from the doll’s perspective.

The constraint of self-centrism during early childhood makes the logic implied in the doctrine of original sin “jump out” at children as they vaguely listen to adults talking about it. The inference that children are evil fits perfectly with the idea that they may cause evil, as they “cause” other things, according to their magical thinking. The logical preference of this developmental period, thus, interlocks with the logic of the doctrine. The fit is so tight that it is difficult for the young child to think of an alternative way to explain evil, especially without the ability to do perspective taking.

Augustine (354-430) developed a view of theodicy that begins with perfection that humankind “fell” from. The resulting sinfulness can only be remedied by God’s grace if the child is one of the elect. Martha Ellen Stortz argued that Augustine did not consider children to be depraved but only “non-innocent” (Bunge 2001, 82), but that subtle distinction is entirely lost in the thinking of the young child, so Augustine’s more general view of humankind fits neatly with young children’s magical thinking about being the cause of evil in the world.

Fortunately, young children are more sensitive to nonverbal cues during this period than later, because they do not yet rely so much on language to make meaning. If the doctrine of original sin is presented to them in an atmosphere of love and concern

they will probably respond more to the emotional context than to the interlocking of the logic of doctrine and development.

If one must talk about evil in abstract theological terms to children at all, it may be better to teach them the theodicy of Irenaeus, who was born about 130 and died about 202 (Osborn 2005, 2). This is because he began with the reality of imperfection, but in contrast to Augustine he stressed the growth of humankind toward perfection. Eric Osborn briefly summed up Irenaeus' view by saying: "The process of growth --- through creation, increase, adulthood, multiplication, strengthening, glory and vision of the lord -- - brings incorruptibility (4.38.3)," citing *Against Heresies* to ground his point (Osborn 2005, 224).

The theodicy of Irenaeus has been advocated for generally by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love* (Hick 1968, 217-221) and given context in the modern debate by *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* in which "virtually all the available Christian options on the theodicy problem are defended and/or criticized (Davis 2001, vii)."

Many adults choose to not introduce the language of theodicy to children until late childhood or adolescence if it is introduced at all, because they have intuited the problem of developmental misunderstanding. Avoidance is no solution, however, because if children have even a casual acquaintance with Christian communication in church or during Christian education they will hear or overhear doctrinal logic about evil. The alternative to attempting to shelter children from such language is to invite them into the art of using Christian language in constructive and creative ways that add to their

growth and at the same time deeply roots them in the Christian Tradition. We turn now to a major danger point in middle childhood.

A MIDDLE CHILDHOOD DANGER POINT

Middle childhood is a time when children begin to understand that the individuals they talk to have a perspective on what is said over against their own. A trade-off logic develops because of this. Fowler, following Piaget and Selman, developed this theoretical point (Fowler 1981, 105, 244-245) in the United States. In Europe Oser and Gmunder also identified the trade-off logic as important for speaking about God during this period (Oser and Gmunder, 1991, 71-76) and used language, borrowed from the old Roman view of religious sacrifice, to describe it by the Latin phrase, *do ut des* (I do so that you do.).

This is also a period when children move from construing the world in terms of episodes and images to the use of narrative to make meaning. As Fowler wrote, “The convergence of the reversibility of thought with taking the perspective of another combined with an improved grasp of cause-effect relations means that the elements are in place for appropriating and retelling the rich stories one is told (Fowler1981, 136).” The story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection stimulates the child’s narrative interest in theodicy, but the reduction of it to the logic of atonement interlocks the doctrinal and the newly interesting trade-off logic developed during this period.

There are generally three kinds of atonement theories in the Christian Tradition. They are the early ransom theories about the struggle between Christ and the Devil, the satisfaction theories that arose in the Middle Ages, based on the Roman law’s satisfaction

of debts theory, and the more modern theories of Christ as an example that is morally persuasive for changing people's lives.

The logic we are concerned about here is based on the satisfaction theory of atonement, which entered the Christian Tradition primarily with Anselm's ((1033-1109) *Cur Deus Homo*, which was written about 1095-1098 while he was Archbishop of Canterbury. It is not entirely logical, as R. W. Southern has pointed out, because "in default of logic, Anselm falls back on a feudal image." This image was the custom of renewing fealty. The logic of his argument would have compelled Anselm to either redeem everyone or just the person who atoned, but neither extreme was satisfying to him because it did not recognize the need for a strict spiritual and moral life, much like that of a monk. This is why he added the need for the king (God) to call people to his court and those who came were granted redemption. Southern went on to say that "In this image it is noteworthy that Anselm attempts no logical explanation of the condition of attendance which the king imposes. Such acts of renewal of homage and fealty, either by whole communities or by men guilty of rebellion, were a familiar part of his world (Southern 1993, 214-215)." This made his approach more plausible to the Middle Ages, but today many children hear the satisfaction theory of atonement only in terms of its trade-off logic. God trades Jesus' life for theirs.

The interlock during middle childhood between the developmental preference for a trade-off logic and the doctrinal logic of atonement teaches children by default that the solution to evil is mostly a rational balancing of accounts. If children listen closely, however, they will discover that the trade-off is not really fair, a very important issue for children during this period of development. God still reserves the right to decide who is

and is not redeemed. This must mean that the adults must be in error about the balancing of accounts approach to evil. Fortunately, however, logic is not all there is to communication with children concerning theodicy.

If the doctrinal logic is conveyed with the wonder of God's love without an emphasis on the bargain or God's capriciousness, then, the child may not care about the logic, so the interlock will not take place. It is also true that sometimes children just don't listen to adults when they do not make sense, according to the child's preferred logic. Either way children would then have a chance to continue to grow theologically. Their creative process will flourish when they feel safe in God's loving presence, so they can find new ways to understand and cope with the evil they encounter in the world.

A LATE CHILDHOOD DANGER POINT

Late childhood is a time when individual stories begin to be integrated into a master story of meaning. Perspective taking continues to develop so that a third-person point of view can be taken to understand the interaction between two children and sometimes even more complex social situations. This means that social perspective taking begins to be coordinated with the perspective of God as well.

This new way of thinking about social and theological situations also helps children become more school wise. They learn how to do well in school and to know when they are failures. Part of this learning involves how to take tests and the memorization of what the teacher values as both questions and their answers. This conditions children during late childhood to value the use of memory and will to succeed, even if they do not understand what they are memorizing and being disciplined (or

disciplining themselves) to use for school success. In the same way memorized theodicy abstractions are sometimes willed to substitute for personal meaning.

When children encounter something painful, during this period, they may still find narrative the most satisfying way to make existential meaning despite the method they are taught in educational settings for knowing such “subjects” as science, grammar, math, history and sometimes even theology. The skill for answering questions put in the form of multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blanks and even essays written to reproduce the teacher’s conclusions is not useful to understand and cope with personal pain and suffering. The willed reproduction of memorized propositional statements about theodicy may appear as successful teaching and learning from the teacher’s point of view, but not be able to satisfy the child’s existential questions.

Oser and Gemunder discovered that during the transition between their third and fourth stages, during late childhood, the ability appeared to distinguish between the immanence and transcendence of God (Oser and Gemunder 1991, 74). It seems to me that a second and parallel distinction, also related to perspective taking, appears at that time between personal pain and suffering and abstract evil. The result is that Christian abstractions about theodicy may be given assent and be reproduced in conversation with adults, but they do not address the child’s experience of evil in personal terms.

When this happens a gap appears between personal experience and Christian abstractions. If this gap is not bridged by narratives that link the child’s story with those of Christian exemplars and by other means such as Christian liturgy, then a loss of confidence may develop about using any of the Christian language system as a tool to make existential meaning. Unfortunately this loss of confidence is reinforced by the

larger culture as children move into adolescence, which is the very time when these tools are most needed to fashion a new and more mature identity.

Fortunately, some children may still come into contact with the sacred stories, liturgical action, parables, and contemplative silence of the Christian Tradition to bridge the gap between personal experience and doctrine. These more experiential kinds of communication can expand and enrich rather than reduce Christian meaning to abstractions to be memorized and willed to use.

An emphasis on abstract concepts during this period without acknowledging children's experience of evil in other ways and by wondering with them about the logical problems involved will result in an inadvertent teaching of children to lose confidence in the whole Christian language system. The danger point here is not merely the arresting of theological thinking but the discarding of theological thinking as part of one's life

CONCLUSION

The goal of talking about evil with children is to help them understand and cope with evil but also to do this in a way that does not arrest the growth of their cognitive ability to think theologically. If God-talk about evil is associated with the creation of meaning about the *experience* of evil and God's *presence* rather than the repeating of abstract doctrinal logic, then a rooted yet open foundation for Christian thinking can be established that can be carried forward into adolescence, adulthood, and later life.

If we do not carefully invite children to create their own meaning and, thus, become moral agents, then we abandon them to evil without any theological resources for their lives except the thinking they borrowed as children from well-meaning adults. These remembered formulations --- stuck in the limited, logical preferences of early,

middle, and late childhood --- will become more and more inadequate as the rest of the person's social thinking becomes increasingly differentiated and complex concerning secular matters during adolescence and young adulthood.

Abstract, doctrinal answers for perplexing, personal experiences of evil are short sighted at best and cruel at worst. What children need instead is to be respected for their questions and for adults to spend time with them to show them the art of how to draw on the Christian resources of sacred story, parable, liturgical action, and deep meditative silence to know God personally. The "answers" needed are not neat, logical formulae but the mystery of God's presence known by experience and the art of how to use the raw materials --- sacred story, parables, liturgical action, and a rich contemplative life --- to create their own theological thinking. Adults need to stay in conversation with children who are asking theodicy questions earlier than they may realize and that their presence and concerned communication can *show* as well as speak about God's presence in the midst of evil as children seek the appropriate words for them to identify, express, and name better ways to understand and cope with evil as they move towards adolescence and young adulthood.

Children need to become creators in God's image rather than models of memory and will, so Sunday can be joined to the rest of the week and Christ can inform culture as well as be defined by it.

REFERENCES

- Bunge, Marcia J. 2001. *The child in Christian thought*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Davis, Stephen T., Ed. 2001. *Encountering evil: Live options in theology*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press.

Fowler, James W. 1981. *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Hick, John. 1968. *Evil and the God of love*. London: Collins, Fontana Library.

Osborn, Eric. 2005. *Irenaeus of Lyons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oser, Fritz and Gemunder, Paul. 1991. *Religious judgment: A developmental approach*. Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press.

Piaget, Jean. 1955, French 1923. *The language and thought of the child*. New York: Meridian Books.

_____. 1932. *The moral judgment of the child*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

_____. 1968. *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic Books.