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A Burning Child in the Midst: The Promise and Power of R.L. Stollar's Child Liberation Theology

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“No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”

—Rabbi Irving Greenberg¹

Then Jesus asked the boy's father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And the father said, “From childhood. The unclean spirit has often thrown him into fire and water, in order to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us!”

Then Jesus said to him, “If you can?” All things are possible for the one who believes.”

—Mark 9:21-232

R.L. Stollar is a child liberation theologian, who writes and works toward “children being liberated from the pain and suffering forced upon them by abusive principalities and powers.”³ Like other liberation theologies, child liberation theology starts from the concrete situation of children in the world—especially ways they are disadvantaged and oppressed—and seeks their self-determination, freedom, and flourishing in the “here and now.”

Stollar points to Rabbi Irving Greenberg's arresting image: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”⁴ As Stollar says, “This is not theoretical.”⁵

1. Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust,” in Eva Fleischer, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 23.

2. All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

3. R.L. Stollar, *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 4.

4. Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” 23.

5. R.L. Stollar, Email interview with Abram Kielsmeier-Jones, 7 and 27 December 2023.

The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology is Stollar's book-length call to reflection and action, with the goal of “equipping and empowering [children] to discover and speak about God on their own terms and with their own language.” Liberation theologies have self-determination and freedom from oppression as goals, but they have often overlooked children.

Anyone who would theologize—or who would say *anything at all*—has a high standard to meet.⁶

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And children, Stollar says, “are burning right now—from bombs in Palestine to worldwide fires caused by our climate

6. “Children, right now, are being abused and killed because of the choices adults are making. If the child liberation theology I am promoting does not help address this problem, it's not worth my energy or time” (Stollar, Interview).

7. R.L. Stollar, *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023).

8. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 5.

crisis.”⁹ Accordingly, *The Kingdom of Children* begins with a sobering survey of the maltreatment of children: “A report of child abuse is made every ten seconds in the United States. As many as one hundred thousand American children are trafficked for the purpose of labor and sexual exploitation each year. Globally, one in three victims of human trafficking is a child.”¹⁰

Microaggressions toward children

Even children who are not “burning” are subject to microaggressions. Derald Wing Sue defines racial microaggressions as, “the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated.”¹¹ Microaggressions toward children could include a racialized component or not, and could be understood—adapting Dr. Sue—as “the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to *children* by well-intentioned *adults* who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated.”¹² Indeed, in the Foreword to Stollar’s book, Cindy Wang Brandt speaks of “microaggressions committed in the ways we speak to and about children.”¹³

Microaggressions are subtle, verbal, and non-verbal, often automatic or unconscious, cumulative, harmful,¹⁴ and intersectional.¹⁵ “Micro” here does not mean small—the cumulative impact of microaggressions can be severe¹⁶—but interpersonal, as opposed to aggressions occurring at a macro- or institutional level.

Within a recent 48-hour span, one of my children was subject to microaggression from one trusted adult and to verbal and spiritual berating from another. These adults both work with children for a living. Ironically (providentially?) our family had just read together, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young” (1 Timothy 4:12, NIV). I tried to use the interactions as an occasion to affirm how loved and valued our children are. I openly lamented with them that adults fail in how we treat children—and that this is not okay. Without over-involving the

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children, I would address this with the relevant adults.

We adults hurt children, to borrow a line from the confession, “in thought, word, and deed.”¹⁷ Sometimes we know it; other times we don’t. Stollar notes:

Probably the most common way that adults put down children in everyday life is by comparing people or things they do not like to children. So, for example, liberals and leftists frequently describe former President Donald Trump’s abusive and cruel behavior as “childish” or “like a child.”¹⁸

Stollar points to the words of Jesus, who frames “like a child” in a very different light: we need to become “like little children” if we would “enter God’s kingdom” (Matthew 18:3). We should *want* to be “childish”! Stollar continues:

So, we keep ourselves in check by not only seeing and respecting the image of God reflected in children, but also by seeing and respecting children as models for the kingdom of God. In other words, don’t view children as merely objects to convert. See children as active agents who can teach you as much as you can teach them.¹⁹

In this way, child liberation theology offers a powerful antidote to both child maltreatment and anti-child microaggressions. We are to love children as God does, which means treating them with the utmost respect, care, and kindness, even in how we talk about them when they are not present.

More than this, we are to love God as children do. Stollar points out that not only should we stop putting children down in even subtle ways; we are called to elevate them and look up to them as exemplars of the kingdom of God. Jesus said, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child does will never, ever enter into it” (Mark 10:15).²⁰

17. *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 360.

18. Stollar, Interview.

19. Stollar, Interview.

20. Here in translation, I bring out the force of the Greek emphatic double negative *ou mē* with “never, ever.”

9. Stollar, Interview.

10. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 2.

11. Derald Wing Sue, “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life,” *Psychology Today* (October 5, 2010), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life> Accessed 15 February 2024.

12. Sue, “Racial Microaggressions,” adaptations in italics.

13. Cindy Wang Brandt, Foreword, in Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, x.

14. Proverbs 12:18 reminds us, “The words of the reckless pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (NIV). There can be impact regardless of intent.

15. One might aggress with respect to age, gender, and race, all at once.

16. See Jaymie Campbell, “Microaggressions and Sex Education: Race, Gender, and Sexuality,” *Teaching Sex Ed: Translating Theory into Practice* (April 30, 2014), <https://teachingsexed.wordpress.com/2014/04/30/microaggressions-and-sex-education-race-gender-and-sexuality/> Accessed 16 April 2024.

Reading the Bible with actual children

One way to “receive the kingdom of God like a child” is to read the Bible with children. This practice—“to read the Bible with actual children,” as Stollar puts it²¹—is central to the task of child liberation theology.

The “here-and-now” call to read with children is a gut check to so-called “child in the midst” theologies, where interpreters may follow Jesus in centering children in biblical interpretation, but—deliberately or not—more theoretically. Is “the child” a real person with a name and story, or more of a construct? Or perhaps the child in *the text* is real—with interpreters laudably willing to go to great lengths to locate him or her—but the child remains present only in the ancient text. It is still today’s adult who “reads” the child.²²

For example, theologian Rohan P. Gideon notes, “the phrase child-in-the-midst has been given the status of a method.”²³ He quotes John Collier as saying that for child theology, “It should not affect us whether or not children are actually present.”²⁴ Indeed, in the Preface to *Toddling to the Kingdom*, Collier says, “We aim to have a child ‘with us’ as we do our theological work,” and in a footnote clarifies that scare quotes mean the presence is at least usually theoretical: “It needs to be made clear at the outset that this does not necessarily, or even usually, mean that we have a child with us in the room ‘in the flesh.’”²⁵

By contrast, child liberation theology is earnest in both its centering and concretizing of children. Here children are not only symbols, stand-ins, constructs, or method. Reading the Bible with children is more than *reading the Bible with children in mind* and more than *reading the Bible through the eyes of child-ness*—important as both those tasks are.

Stollar says:

21. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 26, 31, 36. Emphasis added.

22. Take one approach to reading where children are present in the text: “Perhaps, at this point, an analogy of a camera and photograph is helpful. . . . If children are the subject being photographed, one can apply the lens of a known higher criticism, such as literary or historical criticism, to the picture. One can also apply the lens or filter of Childist Criticism. Indeed, each of the authors here has done so” (Kristine Henriksen Garaway and John W. Martens, “Introduction: The Study of Children in the Bible: New Questions or a New Method?” in Garaway and Martens, eds., *Children and Methods: Listening to and Learning From Children in the Biblical World* [Leiden: Brill, 2020], 11). As liberating as a Childist or child-focused lens is, could not the child in the analogy also be the photographer?

23. Rohan P. Gideon, “The Agency of Children in Liberation Theologies in India and Children-Related Theologies: A Contrapuntal Liberative Analysis” (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2015), 159.

24. Gideon, “The Agency of Children in Liberation Theologies in India,” 159. Gideon goes on, “Collier makes it clear that Child theology begins to define the agency of children even without children’s presence and their views. Their presence or absence is not of a hermeneutic significance as child theology seems to read the act of Jesus purely symbolically.”

25. John Collier, Preface, in John Collier ed., *Toddling to the Kingdom: Child Theology at Work in the Church* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2009), 8-9.

The theoretical child in the midst does not speak. An actual child communicates. Child theology that liberates children means reading the Bible with actual children today, and listening to what they say.

Reading the Bible with actual children, as I describe the process in my book,²⁶ involves much more than just reading children Bible stories at bedtime. Reading the Bible with actual children means that we need to see and treat children as both learning partners and sources of revelations. In other words, we have to see children as complex subjects with their own personal and communal relationships with God and the Bible, rather than merely objects for adults to convert and mold. Children are not mission fields; they are human beings imaged after God, just like you and me. As a result, they can have deep and profound insights about life and they can teach adults so much, if only we would humble ourselves and listen.²⁷

The theoretical child in the midst does not speak. An actual child communicates. Child theology that liberates children means reading the Bible with actual children today, and listening to what they say. How?

There are so many opportunities that present themselves every day where we can sit at the feet of children and learn from their unique and fascinating perspectives—whether that is during a family devotional or Sunday school or an after-school religious program. Instead of always *telling* children what to think about Bible stories, ask children what they think. Engage them as the individual people they are. Empower them to read and interpret the Bible just like you do.²⁸

Reading the Bible with actual children in this way helps even those who are ready to center the child in the Bible—we move from study *of* texts about children to study *with* children of texts.

Reading the Bible with children and asking them what they think can be a powerful experience for adults. A 12-year-old Jesus is left behind by his family in Jerusalem. In the temple “all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:47). One longs for more details of the dialogue between

26. “Reading the Bible with children . . . means intentionally asking children, ‘What do you think?’—and then listening to their responses” (Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 36).

27. Stollar, Interview.

28. Stollar, Interview.

boy Jesus and the teachers. It seems a safe interpretation that these adult teachers were reading the Bible with the child Jesus—and his insights into Scripture and the things of God sparked their amazement.

But all of this is too much adult theorizing about children.²⁹ Let me bring an actual child—my amazing, wonderful, inspirational, incredible, intelligent, superb pre-teen daughter Junia—into this article.³⁰ We had been discussing the different Gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes. What did she think? Reflecting on the presence of a boy in only John's feeding account, she says:

I think that it is weird that only John mentions the boy because he doesn't cover stories of Jesus with children, unlike the other gospels. It seems accurate that there would be a boy, because the other gospels include that there were five bread loaves and two fish. Maybe John wanted to show that he cared about children (but did he?) even though he hadn't written any other stories of Jesus with children. Maybe he wanted to emphasize that children can do stuff (like helping feed 5000 people) and were important.

Jesus as (still) child

Junia's curiosity spurs my own: why aren't there more children in John's gospel? Why are there no childhood narratives of Jesus himself in John? And in Mark? Child liberation theology emphasizes what is nonetheless a crucial aspect of Jesus' identity: Jesus as child.

Stollar writes, "Child liberation theology puts the child aspect of Jesus in the front and center and interprets biblical passages in light of it."³¹ Elsewhere he says, "[B]eing a child is central to who Jesus is."³²

Luke includes in his narrative Jesus as a newborn (Luke 2:7), Jesus as a baby being circumcised and presented in the temple (Luke 2:21ff.), Jesus as a growing and maturing child (Luke 2:40), and Jesus as a 12-year-old doing theology with (teaching theology *to!*) adult religious leaders (Luke 2:42ff.). Future work in child liberation theology would do well to pay attention to these and other related texts where Jesus is a child.³³

Moreover, Stollar suggests we understand Jesus-as-Child

29. There is inherent tension in adults "doing" child liberation theology.

30. In fact, she has entered the article already, as this sentence previously referred to her just as "my pre-teen daughter Junia," until I passed the keyboard over to her. I agree 100% with all the adjectives she added, though, so I have preserved them here!

31. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 101.

32. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 102.

33. Luke has "interest in Jesus as a newborn baby, as an infant of one week and as a child of twelve years. In the Second Testament this interest is exceptional" (Reimund Bieringer and Ma. Marilou Ibiza, "The Beloved Child: The Presentation of Jesus as a Child in the Second Testament," in Annemie Dillen and Didier Pollefeys eds., *Children's Voices: Children's Perspectives in Ethics, Theology, and Religious Education* [Leuven, Belgium: Peeters 2010], 122.)

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beyond Jesus' childhood years *per se*. He writes, "The child aspect of the second person of the Trinity is an inherent part of that person."³⁴ And he says, "As the second person of the Trinity, Jesus is always and forever relating to the first person—God the Parent, or 'Yahweh,' as many Christians say—in a familial way: as a child to his parents."³⁵

From child protection to child liberation

The vulnerability of children means there is a need for advocates who will protect them. Stollar describes himself as a child liberation theologian, as well as a child and survivor advocate. Someone with an interest in child protection may be seeking a grounding framework, which child liberation theology can provide. Or someone already believing in and practicing liberation theology may wish to turn attention especially to children.

Given the short distance to travel between (1) child protection and child liberation and (2) liberation theology and child liberation theology, I asked Stollar about these potentially interrelated approaches. He said:

Because child protection is my professional background, I approach child liberation theology with a child protection lens. What this means is that, when I am evaluating whether or not a belief or an action would liberate children, I am not just interested in giving children more freedom and responsibility. More freedom and responsibility are not necessarily always good things in my mind. Sometimes you can give children too much freedom and too much responsibility, without adequately preparing them for it, which ends up backfiring and becomes a form of child abuse or neglect. It becomes either adultification or parentification—situations where children are inappropriately treated like adults or become emotional confidants to their parents.³⁶

Child liberation theology, therefore, does not mean promoting children's agency in an unrestricted and haphazard way. Stollar

34. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 104.

35. Stollar, Interview.

36. Stollar, Interview.

acknowledges that others “approach these issues differently.” He says:

[Some people] believe, for example, that having a nighttime curfew, or a bedtime, is a violation of children's human rights, or that age of consent laws (laws that prohibit adults from having sexual contact with children) are unfair to children. I vehemently disagree with such people as well as believe they are a threat to child advocacy. And that likely is because I am personally a survivor of child sexual abuse. I know firsthand how evil adults can be toward children and I think children deserve to be protected from that evil as much as possible. That is the entire reason why I do child liberation theology: to protect children from those who wish to abuse or neglect them.³⁷

Jesus liberates a burning child in the midst

One way Jesus protected children was by healing them and exorcising abusive spirits that overwhelmed them. Jesus—child liberation theologian *par excellence*—met Rabbi Greenberg's sobering standard: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”³⁸

Mark 9 describes a father taking his son to Jesus' disciples to cast out an “unclean spirit.” Undeterred by the disciples' inexplicable failure, the dad takes his child to Jesus:

Then Jesus asked the boy's father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And the father said, “From childhood. The unclean spirit has often thrown him into fire and water, in order to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us!”

Then Jesus said to him, “‘If you can?’ All things are possible for the one who believes” (Mark 9:21-23).

Jesus was making a *statement*—explicitly *theological*—when he said, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” And he said it *in the presence of a literally burning child*—“the unclean spirit has often thrown him into fire and water, in order to destroy him.”

Would the statement be credible? The father seems unsure: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). But Jesus backs up the theological statement made in the burning child's presence—namely, a call to believe—with action. Mark says, “Now Jesus, seeing that a crowd was running up, rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You speech-robbing and deaf-making spirit! I command you: come out of him and never again go back into him’” (Mark 9:25).

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Education for child liberation theology

What educational opportunities—whether formal degrees or otherwise—are best suited for someone who wants to learn more about and better practice child liberation theology? Here is Stollar's response:

I would suggest to potential students of child liberation theology that they think about how they can apply the principles of child liberation theology to whatever field in which they already are. ...Ask how your field can contribute to child protection and child liberation. Think about practical ways that you can advocate for children and their caretakers in your everyday work and life.³⁹

Even as adults like me consider how to educate ourselves in child liberation theology, we can consider: in the spaces I inhabit now, how can I promote children's agency and leadership?

How will we know when children are liberated?

Stollar talks about how liberation theologies have an in-their-own voice theme to them. He reiterates that the goal is for children to “create and lead the theology themselves.”⁴⁰ In the meantime, adults ought to strive “toward a relationship of *guided partnership*” with children in this work. “This is the model,” Stollar says, “for child liberation theology to follow in its preliminary stages.”⁴¹

I asked him: how will we know we are moving from these preliminary stages of guided partnership, closer to actual liberation of children, where they speak in their own voice and lead change? What indicators would be present? In other words, what does it look like when child liberation theology is happening? He responded:

For child liberation theology to actually happen, children need to be equipped and empowered to participate and lead in their communities. So, I think we will know we are going in the right direction when we start to see

37. Stollar, Interview.

38. Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” 23.

39. Stollar, Interview.

40. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 27.

41. Stollar, *Kingdom of Children*, 136.

children and their voices being proactively included and prioritized by adults, especially adults in positions of authority and leadership—like parents, pastors, and directors of religious organizations. And to be clear, going in the right direction does not require an overnight revolution of the way your family, faith community, or religious organization does things. Going in the right direction can start with small things, like remembering to always ask children the question, “What do you think?”—and then actively listening to children’s answers. This question—“What do you think?”—is so important to ask children. It acknowledges that children already have thoughts, and it also gives children the space and freedom to figure out their own perspective on the world apart from adult pressure. So, when we start seeing families, faith communities, and religious organizations making a regular habit of humbly asking children questions such as, “What do you think about how we’re treating children and interacting with them?” that is a great indicator.⁴²

Not growing weary

For anyone advocating for children’s flourishing, there are risks: the risk of saying and doing adultist things, of not prioritizing children *enough*, of saying something vapid or abstract in the presence of hurting children. A child liberation theologian also risks exhaustion, being misunderstood, secondary trauma, and re-activation of one’s own childhood trauma.

I asked Stollar how child liberation theologians can “not grow weary in doing good” (Galatians 6:9).

Child liberation theology gives me the opportunity to turn something full of darkness—my childhood experience of religious and sexual abuse—into something full of promise and hope. This is me taking the ashes and forming them into a phoenix.

He replied:

So how do you sustain yourself in the midst of such darkness? I mean, to be frank, this is exactly why I do child liberation theology. Child liberation theology gives me the opportunity to turn something full of darkness—my childhood experience of religious and sexual abuse—into something full of promise and hope. This is me taking the ashes and forming them into a phoenix. Knowing that the Bible can be challenged and questioned, that the Christian faith does not have to be about authority and hierarchy, and that children are capable of so many amazing and powerful things—that sustains me. Because I see change happening in the dark places when adults start thinking about and treating children differently, even if those changes are ever so small at first. But they grow slowly and steadily, like mustard seeds of faith that promise to one day move mountains.⁴³

42. Stollar, Interview.

43. Stollar, Interview.