

The Mystery of the Child, by Martin E. Marty. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007. 257pp., hardback, \$24.00, ISBN 9780802817662.

Martin Marty is a renowned church historian and theological interpreter of culture, the author of over fifty scholarly texts and currently Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago. In this book, however, he tackles—at the invitation of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University in Atlanta—a topic that has not previously been one of his research specialisms: the child. As he has four biological children, however, and has been a step-parent to another, “foster-adopting parent” of four others, and boasts nine grandchildren and three great grandchildren, he has some background experience to draw on!

Marty is concerned to see the child as a subject of intrinsic worth, and particularly as a *mystery* rather than a problem. In developing this theme he touches on the work of a number of Christian theologians, particularly his former colleague David Tracy, Sam Keen, and (in an extended reflection on “resources of wonder” in the provision of care for children) Karl Rahner and his “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood.” In that essay Rahner, too, affirms that “childhood involves a mystery, the mystery of our whole existence, the ineffable element in which is God himself.”

The present book is mainly aimed at those who provide care for children, but Marty rightly acknowledges that “every provider of care is somehow a teacher” (5). I am unclear how this intended audience will receive this work. As a consequence of his highlighting of the child as mystery rather than the child as problem, those who read the text in order to fulfil a more practical need may find some of the author’s claims a little too general. They are told, for example, that “it is difficult to give the mystery of the child fair play unless one can control the impulse to control” (34); and they are encouraged to “let her dance”: “let her evoke responses of wonder and move on refreshed for life in the practical and ordinary world” (69). Clearly the book has been written to provoke change in the reader’s attitude and vision, rather than to help them express these (admittedly, highly significant) things in very practical ways.

Marty commends for our attention a quotation from Georges Bernanos: “the world is to be judged by children. The spirit of childhood is going to judge the world.” With R.C.H. Lenski, Marty would have us think of childlike spirituality as being a matter of possessing nothing but needing everything. He finds humility, receptivity and responsiveness to be the key elements in Jesus’ teaching (and actions) concerning the relationship between the child and the Kingdom of God. And, like Rahner, he forbids

us from treating childhood merely as a preparation for adult life, for that would make the child an object instead of “a presence.”

Much of this material is helpful in stimulating our reflections on the proper attitude to adopt to children and childhood. I could envisage it being fruitfully developed in dialogue with Edward Bailey’s account of the role of children as “wilful divinities” in many people’s implicit religion. In that context, perhaps, the final chapter on ageing may seem somewhat less of a surprise. Here Marty quotes Rahner once more, underscoring the latter’s insistence that biological childhood is “only the beginning, the prelude, the foretaste and the promise” of the true and proper childhood of maturity. (Neither of them is referring to a “second childhood” of senility.)

This particular reader, however, has put down the book with some sense of frustration. Could not more be said? Perhaps the author would reply that such a criticism is only to be expected in response to any attempt to articulate a mystery. The rest will always have to be silence.

Jeff Astley

Address for correspondence:

North of England Institute for Christian Education
18 North Bailey, Durham City, DH1 3RH

Email: jeff.astley@durham.ac.uk

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook Practices That Transform Us by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005. 293pp., paper, US\$18.00, ISBN 139780830833306.