

WHAT IS SACRED FOR CHILDREN?

By SONJA M. STEWART

IN THE WEST THERE CAN NO LONGER be the assumption that children are consciously brought up within a religious tradition. As so many children today are brought up without the predispositions created by religious structures, what do they perceive as sacred? What language do they use for these places, people, experiences or whatever it is that to them have, in adult language, a touch of the transcendent? What can established traditions learn from this?

These questions have bothered me ever since I read them. In fact to deal with these feels more than I bargained for. I have never really asked children what they hold sacred. The more I consider these questions, the more I read about the spirituality of children, and the more I observe children, the more I realize how difficult it is to know what children hold sacred. I am not alone in this, for as I scanned the literature I found nothing that convincingly addressed these questions directly. Even the Internet was silent. However there is literature on the spirituality of children. Perhaps we are dealing with the wrong questions. My own research shows a very successful way to help young children around the world (both those from a Christian background and those who deny a religious persuasion) to fall in love with the God of the Bible. These children can appear very profane one moment and very spiritual the next. Yet through their budding relationship with God they begin to consider sacred the gifts God has given them: a special self, family, and the created order. But I am getting ahead of my story.

I am impressed with the question 'What do children who are brought up without the predispositions created by religious structures perceive as sacred?', because it assumes that all children hold something sacred. It assumes, as I do, that there is not an absence of the sacred in young children as some might suggest. Yet why single out those outside a religious tradition? Do not all young children have a sense of the presence of the transcendent?

Ana-Maria Rizzuto, in her book *The birth of the living God*, shares her search for the child's formation of God. She found that agnostics and atheists have ideas and images of God. God is in the minds of

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nonbelievers even though that God may be denied, rejected or ridiculed. She also found that each child composes their own God:

Now the God of religion and the God of the child-hero face each other. Reshaping, rethinking, and endless rumination, fantasies and defensive maneuvers, will come to help the child in his or her difficult task. This second birth of God may decide the conscious religious future of the child. This is the critical moment for those interested in catechesis. If they want to understand the progress of an individual child they must have some knowledge of the private God the child brings with him [or her]. No child arrives at the 'house of God' without his [or her] pet God under his [or her] arm.¹

Something rather interesting emerges from this, that I invite you to consider. What if the places, people, experiences, stories and rituals that young children hold sacred are really 'tools' or avenues by which they are struggling to communicate with and relate to the Holy? What if these earthy, material, sensory things, heroes, heroines, giants and monsters, are things through which children raise the age-old questions in the quiet times at home, or in bed at night, or gazing at the moon and stars, or dealing with illness and death? Where did this world come from? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? What will happen to me when I die? Does God exist? Is there a reality who will always love me and whom I can love? I am suggesting that what children appear to hold sacred serve as 'tools' that enable them to wonder about something much bigger than themselves, something much bigger than life or the worlds their selves compose. Perhaps what children hold sacred are like 'icons' that invite them to wonder, to puzzle, to imagine, dwell in mystery, and to ask the big, essential questions of life. As they enter into communication with these sacred people, places and things they *play* out the issues of reality, to discern or compose for themselves a *self* and a *world* that is livable. So from one point of view, it matters not so much what children hold sacred: blankets and pacifiers, Batman and teddy bears, Superwoman, the Source, or other heroes or heroines that fill the television screen, but whether these are avenues along which children journey to the transcendent, enabling a conversation with the Holy with whom they fall in love and through whom they receive a healthy spirituality. Perhaps most western children are no longer consciously brought up within a religious tradition, but this does not mean that they lack a spirituality or a view of the sacred.

What language do children use to reveal their spirituality?

The language that children first use to convey their spirituality might best be described as body language. It is the face, the eye contact and the smile of the infant that first conveys an image of the transcendent. The infant's smile, and the utterance of sounds are ways of forming a relationship with others and of organizing their personality. Often there is a radiance about the face, a warmth, and the privilege of looking in each other's eyes as long as we want without feeling we have to look away. James Loder first introduced me to seeing the infant's face as a sign of the face of God, the face that will not go away.

In his book, *The transforming moment*, Loder refers to the work of Rene Spitz. In his book, *The first year of life*, Spitz describes four phases children go through in search of a centring of their personality. The first phase he calls the oral stage where the mouth serves as 'the cradle of perception'. The second is the facial mirroring, which I will give attention to later. The third is an anxiety reaction to the sense of the absence of the mother's face which becomes the second organizer of the personality. The emergent centre of the personality becomes the child's determined use of negation. The child's persistent use of 'No' is built on a dynamic pattern that looks much like a reaction formation. The fourth phase establishes the dynamic foundation of the autonomous ego that finally centres the personality. Loder comments on the formation of the ego:

It is constructive for the purpose of repressing hurtful or potentially destructive inner longings and to weigh outer considerations with appropriate objectivity, but it is destructive to the true centering of the personality.²

Loder eventually goes on to show how an ego transformation can occur as a decisive recentring of the personality around a transcendental reality.³

I wish to look closer at the phase of facial mirroring because Loder, Rizzuto and others see this face-to-face interaction as a universal prototype of the divine Presence. Spitz shows that the child at three months is shifting the focus from the mouth toward the love object, usually the nursing mother. The child is seeking and learning to respond to the human face with a smile. Spitz calls this facial mirroring the primary organizer of the personality for the three-month-old.⁴

For Loder:

The face is the personal center that is innately sought by a child and the focus of the earliest sense of one's humanity. The *smiling* response

focuses primal wholeness . . . The *face* here is to be taken as an interpersonal reality and as a primal symbol of wholeness.⁵

Recalling Justin Martyr's notion that the cross is imprinted upon every face, Loder maintains that the 'original face-to-face interaction is the child's sense of personhood and a universal prototype of the Divine Presence'.⁶

The shame-free look of the child eventually disappears, yet the longing for the face that will not go away seems to persist through life. This longing, Loder explains, is not a longing for the mother-child relationship, but 'the impact of that experience in which one is given a place in the cosmos, confirmed as a self, and addressed by the presence of a loving other'.⁷ The eventual centring of the personality in the ego is important for survival but is not definitive of transcendental reality. Ultimately the self must be centred in the Holy.

I have called attention to the infant's face as a starting place of children's spirituality because it appears that the face, so sacred at three months, continues to be a significant means of thinking of God for children.

The renowned Harvard professor of psychiatry, Robert Coles, after thirty years of research with children in crisis, admits that he finally heard their 'God talk'. He writes, in *The spiritual life of children*, that he saw in children in crisis a spiritual life which kept children together psychologically. He heard children 'talk of God, talk to God, talk as if God were speaking to them, or indeed through them to others'.⁸

In *The spiritual life of children*, Coles dedicates a whole chapter to the subject of the 'Face of God'. He begins this chapter with: "'I'll draw his face" – that is a refrain I've heard spoken in many languages by children of Christian denominations and by those who deny any religious persuasion'.⁹ Of the 293 pictures of God that Coles collected, all but thirty-eight are pictures of God's face. Coles comments:

The prominence of the face, and often a single part of the face, has been for me a constant source of interest and wonder – God as glaring eyes, as ears picking up human static, as a mouth that smiles constantly or seems angrily ready to devour any number of devilish enemies in the universe; and God as someone whose wisdom and experience are signified by lined features, gray and white hair, a full or partial beard.¹⁰

Coles believes children draw a face without a body to convey the notion of a liberated God, free of the flesh:

... faces full of so much authority, or grandeur, or power, or love, or mystery, or judgmental passion, or insight, or alarm, or worries, or vulnerability (God as the one who suffers for humankind) – but also, faces suspended bodiless, it seems, in the infinity of space, the eternity of time.¹¹

Let us remember that Coles received pictures of God from children who deny any religious persuasion. I would assume that for them God was someone they held sacred.

Drawing the face of God without a body is certainly a way to convey that God is Spirit, yet I wonder if there may be more to their focus on the face, perhaps an unconscious reminder of that time when they experienced the divine 'Face' of God in the third month of their lives. Drawing gives children a language to express their understanding of what is sacred. The expressions on the face name the characteristics of their God. They draw what is most essential, what is most important and that is the face, a Face that will not abandon them. Could it be that their concentration on the Face of God as a symbol for God is that early spirituality emerging in an attempt to transform the self?

Art, then, is a second language children use to express their feelings, images and questions of what they hold sacred. What is to be considered is that art, like focusing on the face, is a form of communication, a developing of a relationship with what they hold sacred. The language of words, sentences, concepts and ideas follows, and becomes a way of communicating and forming relationships with others and God. David Heller, author of *The children's God*, interviewed 400 children aged four to twelve to discover how children imagine God. Heller not only looked for concepts of the deity that could be recognized specific to the child's religious socialization, but he also wanted to see if there were any themes that were universally held by children that were not due to socialization but seemed to emerge from children's own awareness. Heller describes seven common themes which he considers as residing deep within children, and which are not the result of religious socialization. These seven are: the qualified power of the deity; the intimacy of the deity; omnipresence; anxiety in relation to the deity; transformations caused by the deity; connectedness; and the theme of light. Perhaps these seven themes will provide some clues for the third question, 'What can established religions learn from what children hold sacred?'

The qualified power of the deity

Heller maintains that power seems to be the deepest and most internalized theme for the child. Children sense in the deity a more-

than-human impact on the universe. But this is a qualified power, for the deity can not do everything. The children reason that they should act to find solutions for what God does not do, such as find a cure for cancer or try to help the family love each other more.¹²

The intimacy of the deity

Heller found that universally children know a deity that demonstrates a capacity for intimacy with them and other people. For them intimacy seems to be the very nature of God.¹³

Omnipresence

For children the deity is not limited to a specific place, but rather exists in all time and space. Younger children feel a physical proximity to their deity while older children speak of a spirit in the air.¹⁴

Anxiety in relation to the deity

For children to attempt a declarative statement about a deity creates anxiety. Children are both powerfully attracted to their deity yet also fearful.¹⁵

Transformations caused by the deity

Children associated their deity with psychological, biological and religious transformations which they feel occurring in themselves. They wonder about the role of the deity in these changes. These transformations are more than developmental changes and may also include changes in their world-view and perception of their deity.¹⁶

Connectedness

Children feel that the world and its events share a relationship, and they seek to find their deity as the core of this total interrelationship. This belief helps them develop closer relations to other people and their deity.¹⁷

The theme of light

Heller found the theme of light the most difficult to articulate, and it is to his credit that he recognized this theme even though he acknowledges that it stands outside his construct system and took him by surprise. He writes:

In the world of the child, light may appear as an accoutrement of the deity itself, or as a symbol of its presence. Light also may be revealed as a means of communication between God and people, a spiritual

messenger delivering a divine message. Occasionally, usually by implication or metaphor, light appears in the children's responses as a characteristic related to the child himself or herself, closely associated with the child's self-image.¹⁸

When children speak of light in reference to the self they speak of an inner, ineffable quality, a warm glow in the self that makes them feel good even in crisis situations. It is a light they feel that is transferred to them from the divine.

Heller finds, as have others, that the themes that bring the children closest to themselves as individuals also bring them together through the God conception they have in common.

What can established traditions learn from children?

First we must learn to *listen* to children, for they will show us the way they want to engage the sacred. It appears that all children have some relationship or idea of God whether they are being socialized into a religious tradition or not. As Rizzuto noted, the God of religion and the God of the child-hero meet, for all children carry into the 'house of God' their pet God under an arm. Today they are not entering the 'house of God' but at some time in some way the Gods must meet. Children compose their own God. And, as Rizzuto says, we who teach children do well to discover that God. However, I believe it is far more important to prepare an environment where the two Gods can meet and where the child has appropriate freedom to let the two converse.

What do the seven themes tell us about what children might want from a religious tradition? Concerning power, children long for mutuality and interdependence – not power over them. They want to be treated as subjects, not objects into which information is poured. They want appropriate freedom to choose how they engage their God. Children want an environment that helps them learn of God themselves. They want to develop their own faith. Children seek a free atmosphere to discover God and a freedom to wonder, imagine, puzzle and dwell in mystery and in the presence of their God. They do not want external domination. They want communication with God, not instruction about God. It is as if the child is asking, 'Show me the way to find God by myself'.

Concerning intimacy, children seem to have a certainty of the presence of one who loves them deeply, their God, 'the face', that will not go away. They want a place where they can have intimate conversation with their God, not instruction about God. Children want an environment where they can experience God. When this happens

outside the church, the child is in a safe place, their bed, or yard, or playroom or gazing at the manifestations of nature: a mountain, the sea, the sky, the moon and stars, ants and flowers and trees. These are silent, peaceful times and places. It is a pregnant silence. Children need an environment which provides safe places for silence (not imposed silence), the silence that comes from deep joy and concentration in presence of the sacred. They want an unhurried atmosphere and soft voices, because they might be talking with God and they do not want to be disturbed.

Children want a place to be with people who love and respect them and where everything in that place is respected and valued. That means they need leaders who meet with them regularly, who know their names, who can converse with them about God or give them space and materials to wonder alone. The changing of leaders on a weekly or quarterly basis does not convey a genuine desire for intimacy and love for each child and an appreciation for what children are doing. Children want wonder and conversation, not indoctrination.

Concerning omnipresence, teachers and leaders of children often forget or do not feel the presence of God in the classroom. Yet they need to believe that God is there and to help the children to feel they are in a special place because God is here. Here we can listen to God and talk with God. Since children are carrying their hero-God under their arms they need to hear the most essential stories of the God of religion, and they need time to wonder about the God they meet there. The introduction to the God of religion needs to be made with stories and parables, not in the language of social studies lessons. The stories need to be told with sensory materials that children may use to retell the stories and to work out the questions that emerge as they hear the story or work with those materials. They also need art materials available to them to express their feelings and provide a means to converse with God. They need the freedom to choose what response they want to make, so prepared art projects or pages of fill-in-the-blanks are not wanted. These are someone else's response imposed onto the child. As was said above, children want freedom to use materials to enjoy God's presence in their own way.¹⁹

Concerning anxiety, I believe that some of the anxiety young children experience when asked to make a firm, declarative statement about their deity is due to the fact that young children do not have an intellectual explanation of an experience with God. Their experience of God is at a deep, existential level. Perhaps they experience that mystical union in which one does not try to describe or explain God.

They should not be asked to do something so contrary to their understanding and experience.

Concerning transformation, what part does God play in transformation? I want to return to James Loder's work on transformation. If I understand Loder correctly he says that in grounding our personality in the ego we construct a two-dimensional reality; a *self* and a *world* that is livable. The ego plays an important part, for it tries to protect us from negation, from nothingness. In spite of the ego's valiant attempts, there are times when we are thrust into crises, our lived world is ruptured and we are thrust into a third dimension of knowing, namely the *void*. The void negates our two-dimensional reality, our composed worlds, and threatens us with nothingness. It appears that all we are and do finally comes to nothing. But those who enter the void discover an amazing gift: they are not alone. The Holy as the manifest Presence of Being-itself is present with us, negating the negation of the void and giving us life. Reality is four-dimensional. And life in the Holy is definitive of reality. Life in the Holy enables an ego transformation (not ego destruction) and the personality can be grounded in the Holy. By our abiding in the Holy a transformation of all transformations occurs, and our self and our world reflect God's. We no longer project our two-dimensional reality onto the Holy.²⁰

Now the one thing that the Church can do that other agencies tend not to is tell the biblical stories in a way that provides for the possibility of four-dimensional transformation. Biblical stories serve as a way of participating indirectly in an experience of another. Our knowledge of God comes by entering into the relationships in a story, not by standing outside, observing and analysing. Since the biblical stories and parables are vehicles which carry in their structure both the dynamics and dimensions of four-dimensional transformation, it is important to retain the narrative form of a story, or the metaphorical form of a parable. When we try to turn a parable into a narrative, or reconstruct a story by turning it into a lesson in history, morality or social studies, the transformational logic may be lost.

Further, instead of being prescribed one right response to believe and make, each child prefers to choose his or her own response. In this way children can, at a very early age, come to their own knowing of God.²¹ Concerning connectedness, I observe and experience that when the transformations noted above occur there is a deep bonding between the child, the leader and the story, and God is felt to be at the core of the bonding.

Concerning light, the extensive reference to it in the Bible and in liturgical practice is not by accident. Many scientists believe light to be

the base element of everything. Jesus the Christ said, 'I am the light'. Children have a deep intuitive connection to the Light represented by the paschal candle or the Christ candle. They love the Light and they understand their connection with it. Children understand baptism, the death and resurrection of Christ and his ascension, through the Christ candle.

These are some of the things I have learned by listening to young children, by observing their play and art work. Most children in the West are no longer brought to the places of traditional religion for their religious education, but there are 'wise ones' who have entered a 'second naïveté' who can go to where the children are and tell the stories that will enable them to know God, and thereby hold all God's creation sacred.

NOTES

¹ Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The birth of the living God* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p 8.

² James E. Loder, *The transforming moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), p 164.

³ *Ibid.*, p 167.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 163.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 166.

⁸ Robert Coles, *The spiritual life of children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), p 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 67.

¹² David Heller, *The children's God* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p 107.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 113–114.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 120–121.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 126.

¹⁹ Loder, pp 67–93.

²⁰ Loder, pp 116–169.

²¹ I have written about a way to work with young children that uses the ideas and principles I have discussed here: *Young children and worship* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989). My book shows a way to help children listen and respond to God through the use of multisensory materials to tell biblical stories and parables. The story-telling method is presented concretely by giving the words of the story or parable and also the movements that go with them. It tends to follow the Church's year. Patterns for the figures are included in the book. This approach is used widely throughout the United States and is proving to be cross-cultural, as it is being used in many countries around the world including Mexico, Spain, South Africa, Russia, Japan, and other Asian countries.