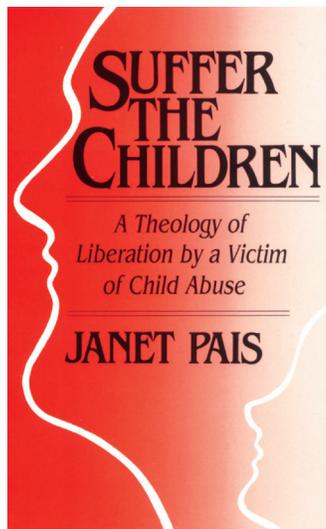

Suffer the Children: A Review Article

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Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse. By Janet Pais. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1991. ISBN: 978-0-8091-3226-3. iii & 172 pages. Paper.

Child Liberation Theology, of which Janet Pais' *Suffer the Children*

is an early example, is a small theological movement that has emerged organically in response to changing cultural attitudes toward children, and more specifically, child abuse. So far, it has failed to achieve the level of recognition enjoyed by other child-focused groups like the Child Theology Movement or Children's Spirituality.¹ However, thanks to the efforts of Ryan Stollar and Craig Nesson, neither has it faded into obscurity.² Still, despite both Stollar and Nesson viewing Pais' work as highly significant for Child Liberation Theology, her book has never been reviewed in an academic context, and has rarely been considered with more than a passing reference. As such, what follows is not only a review of *Suffer the Children*, but also a brief exploration of its historical context, influence, and ongoing significance.

1. For an introduction to the Child Theology Movement see Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point* (London, England: WTL Publications Limited, 2013); for Children's Spirituality, see David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *Spirit of the Child: Revised Edition* (London: Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006).

2. See R. L. Stollar, "God Is Child: The Child-Centric Christology of Janet Pais," *R.L. Stollar //// Overturning Tables* (blog), December 7, 2015, <https://rlstollar.wordpress.com/2015/12/07/god-is-child-the-child-centric-christology-of-janet-pais/>; Craig L Nesson, "Child Liberation Theology," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 3 (July 2018): 6–13.

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Historical context

In the decades before Pais' book was published, a number of events took place, without which Child Liberation Theology may have never emerged. The first was the development of the concept "child abuse." As outlined by Ian Hacking,³ it was not until 1962 that the term "child abuse" entered popular use, first referring only to physical abuse, then gradually broadening over time. By 1975, it included anything that limited optimal development, and by 1977, the explicit inclusion of incest had been popularized.⁴

In the early eighties, this increasing recognition of child abuse was amplified by numerous attacks on Sigmund Freud's drive theory. Freud's theory, which had prevailed for the better part of the twentieth century, included the idea that young children had an innate sexual desire for their parent of the opposite gender. This led to widespread acceptance of the notion that sexually provocative behavior in young children was normal, which in turn, enabled the pattern of blaming children for the actions of perpetrators. Furthermore, the origin of the theory, which was Freud's conclusion that some childhood recollections of being

3. Ian Hacking, "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 253–288.

4. Notably, the authors that both introduced and popularised the inclusion of incest under the category of child abuse were women. Hacking, 275.

sexually abused were mere fantasies, led to numerous reports of child sexual abuse being dismissed as fiction.⁵ Feminist Florence Rush was one of the first to challenge Freud's theory,⁶ but it was not until 1981, when the *New York Times* featured a critique from psychoanalyst Jeffrey Masson, that American opinions started to shift.⁷ This shift was brought home by Masson's publication of *The Assault on Truth* in 1984,⁸ as well as popular Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller's *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*.⁹

These changes, along with the sensationally reported McMartin Preschool Trial (1983-1990), led to the "sexual abuse recovery movement of the 1980s and 1990s" where reported cases of sexual abuse "skyrocketed."¹⁰ This increase was partly thanks to the help of psychoanalysts who, somewhat controversially, helped victims recover their repressed memories. It was in this context that Pais recovered her memories of abuse by her father: "Following my psychotherapist's occasional suggestions over a three-year period that I had been abused in some way in childhood... I finally was able to become conscious of sketchy memories and their attendant feelings."¹¹ However, the same therapist, having a Freudian background, also defended Pais' father and told her she must have been "a pretty little girl," and "seductive" toward her father.¹² It wasn't until Pais read Miller's *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* that she was able to take her recollections of abuse seriously enough to begin the process of healing. However, Miller was highly critical of the patriarchal elements of Christianity, so in Pais' words: "Because I found so much of Miller's psychology personally helpful, I felt challenged to respond to her attack."¹³ *Suffer the Children* is the result of that process.

Summary

The tension between Pais' indebtedness to Miller, her loyalty to the Christian tradition, and her recognition of the weight of Miller's critiques can be seen throughout the entire work. For example,

5. Wini Breines and Linda Gordon, "The New Scholarship on Family Violence," *Signs* 8, no. 3 (1983): 522-524.

6. Florence Rush, "The Sexual Abuse of Children: A Feminist Point of View," in *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*, ed. Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson (New American Library, 1974), 65ff.

7. Ralph Blumenthal, "Did Freud's Isolation Lead Him to Reverse Theory on Neurosis?" *The New York Times*, August 25, 1981, sec. Science, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/25/science/did-freud-s-isolation-lead-him-to-reverse-theory-on-neurosis.html>.

8. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).

9. Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984); Miller attributes her awareness of the issue to Marianne Krüll, *Freud und sein Vater: D. Entstehung d. Psychanalyse und Freuds ungelöste Vaterbindung* (München: Beck, 1979).

10. Beryl Satter, "The Sexual Abuse Paradigm in Historical Perspective: Passivity and Emotion in Mid-Twentieth-Century America," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 3 (2003): 424ff.

11. Janet Pais, *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991), 50.

12. *Ibid.*, 51.

13. *Ibid.*, 136.

Pais argues from the presupposition that "psychological truth that is necessary for healing...cannot be at odds with theological truth," that all feelings are good, and rejecting children's feelings "breaks wholeness in creation." Therefore, it is not children or their anger and hate that are evil, but contempt and abuse.

while chapter one uncritically introduces Miller's theory that children are abused because of adult "contempt" for "the weakness, neediness, and humiliations of their own childhoods,"¹⁴ chapter two adopts the critical method of liberation theology, intending to rescue aspects of the Christian tradition from their "adultist" interpretations.¹⁵

Pais' critical approach begins in chapter three, where she reinterprets the fall and incarnation. First, she contrasts Mary and Joseph who were purportedly able to parent Jesus without contempt, with Adam and Eve who supposedly held their children in contempt as they had not experienced childhood themselves. Then in chapter four, after arguing that children are born innately good, she attributes "brokenness" to a cascade of cyclical abuse that stems from Adam and Eve's usurping of God's right to decide "What is 'good' and what is 'evil'"—whether about forbidden fruit, nakedness, or children.¹⁶ If instead, adults trust that each child is a "new creation" like Christ, then like Mary and Joseph, they will uncritically accept them and love them in line with God's declaration of the goodness of creation.

In chapter five, Pais treats the relationship between contempt, abuse, and repressed feelings. First, Pais explores how low views of both children and their feelings are used to justify physically abusing them and denying them the expression of their natural reactions to this abuse, such as anger and hate. In response, Pais argues from the presupposition that "psychological truth that is necessary for healing...cannot be at odds with theological truth,"¹⁷ that all feelings are good, and rejecting children's feelings "breaks wholeness in creation."¹⁸ Therefore, it is not children or their anger and hate that are evil, but contempt and abuse. Similarly, in chapter six, she contrasts the low views of children held by Freud and streams of the Christian tradition with Miller's high view of

14. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

15. *Ibid.*, 15.

16. *Ibid.*, 33.

17. *Ibid.*, 44.

18. *Ibid.*, 40.

children. Miller's position allowed Pais to accept the anger and hateful feelings that her "child-self" directed toward her father.¹⁹ At the same time, while anger is an appropriate response to abuse, it is important to let it go after it has run its course, lest it "become entrenched as an attitude."²⁰

Chapters seven to ten deal with different aspects of God's fatherhood. In chapter seven, the Father is revealed through his relationship with Jesus as intimate with, respectful toward, and accepting of the Son. Rather than rejecting the patriarchal image of God, she presents the first person of the Trinity as the true Father, whose love enables us to heal from repression and abuse. Chapter eight examines negative conceptions of God as Father, arguing from the writings of Luther and Augustine that their own experiences of abuse in childhood had colored their understanding of God's fatherhood and the nature of children. For this reason, they believed it is right for divine and human fathers to be "good, powerful, and angry" to children who are "evil and relatively powerless."²¹

Chapter nine considers the nature of divine wrath, arguing that anger properly belongs to children in the context of abuse. Therefore, God's anger is not that of a father against his children, but on behalf of children facing contempt and abuse. This chapter also explores the dynamic between power and needs, arguing from the method of liberation theology that the needs of the powerless (children) must always be given more weight than those of the powerful (parents). Chapter ten, the last chapter on fatherhood, considers the relationship between human projection, being created in the image of God, and God's revelation of himself. Essentially, Pais argues that the brokenness of the relationship between our adult-self and child-self distorts the image of fatherhood in us, which we then project onto God. Our internal projections obscure our perception of the invisible God's revelation of his fatherhood. The solution is the incarnation, through which Jesus visibly modeled an alternate "Father-Child relationship" for us to internalize.²² Pais argues that the incarnation *did* transform our understanding of fatherhood, but that it regressed quickly and lapses often.

In chapter eleven, Pais interprets Jesus' teaching about becoming like little children (Matt 18:3) as commanding reconciliation with our inner child. Then, after presenting the adult-child split as a form of "psychic suicide" driven by "self-hate" directed toward the "needs and weaknesses" that inspire contempt from others,²³ she explores the relationship between humility and suffering in the gospel, and the role of gender in experiences of power or humiliation.²⁴ In doing so the crucifixion is presented as emblematic of

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humiliation and suffering—an embrace of needs and weakness—while the resurrection demonstrates the unconquerable nature of the child/Child. Pais also addresses the problem of the Father not intervening at the cross, emphasizing the empathetic unity of the Father with the Son.

Chapter twelve treats the commands to honor parents, and to forgive. First, she casts the command to honor one's parents as originally given for the self-preservation of the child—"so that your days may be long in the land..." Then, she argues that the terrible state of the world, which according to Miller is the result of the adult-child split, shows this advice is "no longer adequate."²⁵ She does clarify, however, that responsibility still lies with the more powerful party, so adults must care for their aged parents so long as they refrain from further abuse. Regarding the command to forgive, Pais defines forgiveness as the openness to reconciliation that comes after rage and "longing for revenge" has run its course.²⁶ Reconciliation is a two-way street which requires acknowledgment of wrong—it is not the sole responsibility of the victim.

Chapter thirteen explores the role of limits and sincerity in "True Relationship with Children,"²⁷ addressing the reality of toddlers' and teenagers' behaviour as limit-testing driven by a legitimate need to feel real—a behaviour which continues into adulthood. She argues that this limit-testing stems from people and truth being known primarily through the process of relationship, and limit-testing breaks through attempts to evade real personal encounters.

Finally, in chapter fourteen Pais concludes that "the vast weight of true Christian belief is strongly on the side of the child,"²⁸ and identifies the church rather than psychology as the locus of true relationships which really bring healing. She closes by addressing the church in light of her theological exploration, then exhorting her readers to lay down "contempt and attitudes about the good and evil of children," instead trusting children to "grow as God intends."²⁹

19. Ibid., 51.

20. Ibid., 54.

21. Ibid., 69.

22. Ibid., 85.

23. Ibid., 94–95.

24. Her considerations of gender explore the role of familiarity with humiliation and pain in the ability of women to stay with Jesus at the cross. This is contrasted with the flight of his male disciples, who would have been more familiar with power. Despite Pais' work having

a focus similar to some feminist theologies of the time, overtly feminist passages are infrequent. This section is a notable exception.

25. Pais, *Suffer the Children*, 107.

26. Ibid., 113.

27. Ibid., 123.

28. Ibid., 137.

29. Ibid., 148.

Discussion

While there are many points of interest in Pais' work, I will discuss just a few. First, in contrast with feminist theologians contemporary to her, even those who draw from Miller,³⁰ it is notable that Pais accepts the crucifixion rather than rejecting it as "Divine child abuse," and she retains the image of God as Father.³¹ In fact, God as Father forms a pivotal part of her theology, with the correction of false images of fatherhood being the counterpoint to reconciliation with one's inner child. Arguably, the relationship between the Father and Child primarily serves as a model to facilitate reconciliation between one's adult-self and child-self. This could be seen as a product of projecting Miller's theory of the adult-child split onto her understanding of the Trinity. The near absence of the Holy Spirit in her theology is also notable,³² although this is not a problem that is unique to Pais.

Pais' high view of children is unique, even within Child Liberation Theology. Her argument for the innate goodness of children is consciously drawn from psychology,³³ but made using traditional concepts like creation in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and the new creation. As a reaction to Freud's theory, this idealization of children is not surprising. Her allusions to the possibility that Jesus' perfection was owed in part to the parenting of Mary and Joseph could also have come from Miller.³⁴ Pais' elevation of the status of children, while sometimes more tempered, is at other times extreme. For example, the child is not only emblematic of vulnerability, but is "the key to the salvation of all of us."³⁵ In contrast, other theologians of childhood tend to emphasize the equality of and continuity between children and adults. The one area in which her view of children is lower than some others is their inability to represent themselves theologically. Since the 1990 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the agency of children has been increasingly recognized in a wide range of scholarship, including in theologies of childhood.³⁶

30. e.g., Rita Nakashima Brock, "And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 42–61.

31. cf. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 2.

32. In chapter seven she presents the Father and Son as interconnected wholeness in the unity of the Spirit. Pais, *Suffer the Children*, 60–61.

33. *Ibid.*, 30.

34. Miller argues that Jesus' good character must have come from his loving father Joseph, as it could not have come from God the Father, of whom she has a very low view. Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, 96–97.

35. Pais, *Suffer the Children*, 13.

36. For example see Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let The Children Come* (San Francisco, Calif.: John Wiley & Sons, 2003); Kristin Herzog, *Children And Our Global Future: Theological And Social Challenges* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Pr, 2005); David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology Of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Pr, 2005).

In 2018, Nessian published *Child Liberation Theology* in this journal, referring to Pais' work as "the creative origin of this under-referenced movement." This was the first substantial acknowledgment of Pais' contribution to Child Liberation Theology in an academic journal.

Influence

The primary significance of *Suffer the Children* is that it is arguably the earliest known example of a full-blown Child Liberation Theology. While feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock drew from Miller's ideas about child abuse earlier,³⁷ she did so more as a means to critique patriarchal elements of Christology than to serve the interests of abused children. After *Suffer the Children*, a number of calls to the task of Child Liberation Theology were published, as well as a thesis on the topic, but none of them cited Pais.³⁸ David Jensen's *Graced Vulnerability*—which includes but is broader than Child Liberation Theology—cites Pais just once,³⁹ and two works focused on children in the context of families cite her a handful of times.⁴⁰ The most significant acknowledgement of Pais prior to Stollar and Nessian would have to be Greg Burch's *Children of the Liberation*, largely because the brevity of the paper means each reference carries more weight.⁴¹

It was not until Stollar began publishing about Child Liberation Theology over 2015 and 2016 that Pais began to receive more

37. See Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Crossroad, 1988); "And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse."

38. Douglas Sturm, "On the Suffering and Rights of Children: Toward a Theology of Childhood Liberation," *CrossCurrents* 42, no. 2 (1992): 149–73; Ann Loades, "Dympna Revisited: Thinking about the Sexual Abuse of Children," in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (T&T Clark, 1996), 253–272; Stephen Pattison, "'Suffer Little Children': The Challenge of Child Abuse and Neglect to Theology," *Theology & Sexuality* 1998, no. 9 (January 1, 1998): 36–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/135583589800500904>; Pieter J J Botha, "Young Bodies and Religion: Exploring the Role of Religion in Child Abuse," *Religion & Theology* 9, no. 1–2 (2002): 42–62; Kimberly Shinabery, "Blessed Are the Children: A Liberation Theology for Abused and Neglected Children" (Iliff School of Theology, 2005), <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/trendisertations/1458>.

39. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*.

40. Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); Adrian Thatcher, *Theology and Families*, 1 edition (Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

41. Greg W Burch, "Children of the Liberation: Reflections on Ministry with Children at Risk," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 40, no. 1 (February 2013): 33–39.

recognition, being referred to as “one of three visionary thinkers,” which had “most shaped [Stollar’s] thinking on child liberation theology.”⁴² But Stollar published on blogs, in a way invisible to the world of Academia. Then in 2018, Nesson published *Child Liberation Theology* in this journal, referring to Pais’ work as “the creative origin of this under-referenced movement.”⁴³ This was the first substantial acknowledgment of Pais’ contribution to Child Liberation Theology in an academic journal.

Significance

There is a degree to which the essence of Pais’ theology is encapsulated in Mark 9:36-37: “Then Jesus took a little child and put it among [his disciples]; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” Because of the Godhead’s identification with weak and needy children, to welcome them is to welcome God the Child, and so God the Father. God is the God of the vulnerable, the God of the abused and oppressed. For Pais, welcoming children includes welcoming her inner child, embracing her weakness and neediness, and facing the hurt and the trauma that she suffered at the hands of others. It means “being real” in relationship with herself, God, the church, her parents, and others. It means reconsidering—from the perspective of the most vulnerable rather than those in power—traditional ideas like original sin and divine wrath, or the commands to forgive and to honor one’s parents. While her answers are not always definitive and are shaped by her context, the questions she raises still present themselves as an urgent task for the church today.

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42. R. L. Stollar, “Using vs. Liberating Children: How Child Theology Differs from Child Liberation Theology,” *R.L. Stollar //// Overturning Tables* (blog), April 26, 2016, <https://rlstollar.wordpress.com/2016/04/26/using-vs-liberating-children-how-child-theology-differs-from-child-liberation-theology/>; See also R. L. Stollar, “The Message of Non-Violence Is a Message First and Foremost For the Powerful,” *R.L. Stollar //// Overturning Tables* (blog), May 3, 2015, <https://rlstollar.wordpress.com/2015/05/02/the-message-of-non-violence-is-a-message-first-and-foremost-for-the-powerful/>; Stollar, “God Is Child.”

43. Nesson, “Child Liberation Theology,” 11.