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Honouring Children: Towards a Theological Anthropology of Children Informed by a Relational View of the Trinity

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Abstract

The views held about the humanity of children influence faith praxis with regard to children. Recognizing the full humanity of children will help pose questions that will lead to critical reflections on theories and practices that underpin the lived realities of neglect, abuse and violence against children. It is said that a faulty anthropology produces a faulty theology, and a faulty theology produces a skewed anthropology. It is argued that views of children that harm them in daily life could be connected with views of God as authoritative, hierarchal, powerful and strong, a God who punishes and disciplines. There is, therefore, the need to explicate a Christian view of children that honours the dignity and humanity of children and could result in faith practices that are liberating. The Trinity could serve as a framework for a theological anthropology of children. The paper explores insights from key scholars such as Miroslav Volf (1998), Jürgen Moltmann (1991) and Catherine LaCugna (1991) on a relational view of the Trinity to glean resources that could influence a theological understanding of the personhood of children: resources which recognise the full humanity of children and honour their dignity, and interdependence as well as mutuality in faith communities and society. The paper posits that a relational view of the Trinity could provide a sounder foundation for a deeply relational and non-hierarchical Christian view of children that are honouring, and therefore, promotes faith praxis that is liberating and encourages flourishing.

Introduction

Children are all around us. They are found everywhere in the communities such as homes, schools, markets, cinemas, churches, and streets, to name a few examples. Children have a significant

influence on our world, and on every aspect of society. It is estimated that children make up one-third of the world's population. Consequently, there is a growing interest in studies focusing on issues of children, especially, lived experiences of violence and abuse in African communities. In spite of the significant interest in a theological reflection on children, there is a challenge in the views and understanding of children as well as faith praxis with regard to children in the faith community and society as a whole (Bunge & Eide 2022: xiii). There is still a significant gap in the way we think about the humanity of children, their needs and how these needs should be addressed, both in the faith communities and the society as a whole. Nelson Mandela (1995) observed that "there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children". This implies that the views held about the humanity of children and the responses to their needs could paint a picture of the future state of faith communities and society. Mtata (2009:85) argues that the African construction of personhood puts children at the margins and this could partly contribute to the lived experiences of violence and dehumanisation. This marginalisation of children is not only in society but also prevalent in faith communities. It is believed that our notion of God influences our understanding of human beings. As Mtata (2009:85) observed, "a faulty anthropology produces a faulty theology, and a faulty theology produces a skewed anthropology". This points to the fact that there is a strong connection between the views held about God and human beings. It is also argued that the concept of God as authoritative, powerful and having dominion to rule over the earth could underline the ordering of society in a hierarchical manner, where those at the top rule over those down (Moltmann 1985:241-142). This creates a relationship in which one has more power than the other and, in some cases, the imbalance of power may contribute to seeing some as inferior. For example, views about personhood could be influenced by the view of God as authoritative, powerful, and punishing wrongdoing (Johnson 2016:3).

One key notion of God that is thought to be connected to violence against children is the concept of retribution. This notion views God as impersonal and completely holy; a God who does not tolerate sin and punishes sin. One of the theologians who expounded this concept was Millard Erickson, who opined that "the nature of God is perfect and complete holiness. This is... the way God is by nature. He has always been absolutely holy.... Being contrary to God's nature, sin is repulsive to him. He is allergic to sin, so to speak. He cannot look upon it" (1984:802). This implies that God must punish sin. God cannot ignore sin because if he does, the very moral fibre of our society will be destroyed (Erickson 1984:816). Consequently, in line with the above, when children sin or go wrong, they are punished in order to help them refrain from sinning.

This notion of God could contribute to the debate on corporal punishment and abuse of children by significant authorities such as parents, teachers, caregivers and others. It is observed that corporal punishment (justifiable violence) is widely used by faith communities, with the belief that physical disciplining children is required by God as recorded in Scripture (e.g. Prov 23:13-14; Vieth, 2017:33; Hoffman et al. 2017:81-82). As a result, adherents to this view could subject children to several forms of punishment, contributing to abuse and violence.

It could be argued that this notion of God, when held in isolation, presents God as impersonal, unloving, unrelational, unforgiving and dehumanising. When God is construed primarily in terms of impersonal holiness, the biblical image of God as loving, relational and mutual is lost. Kaufman (1993:388) cautions that recognising the human origin of all concepts of God is key and it should

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continually serve as an evaluative key. This implies that the effects of our conceptualization of God on human life should be a critical factor in our theologising efforts. A fundamental factor in this regard, Kaufman argues, is examining the extent do our God-concepts enhance humanisation (well-being). We contend that the Trinity, which is the Christian concept of God, is relational and humanising. Allowing this notion of God to serve as an anthropological lens of all humans, including children, encourages a view of children that is dignifying and supportive.

The notion of retribution, coupled with the view that children are not fully human, could influence societal structures and relational spaces within which violence against children is either perpetrated or maintained. The question still remains as to how we should think about the agency, dignity and humanity of children in a way that honours their full humanity? What theological understanding – w when held by faith communities – c ould be grounded in a Christian anthropological view of children? Bunge and Eide (2022:xv) relate that embarking on theological reflections aimed at moving people from the margins of society to a place of centrality and dignity is a rocky and complex road. While this could be the case, I argue that a reflection on a theological anthropology of children, done through the lens of a relational paradigm of the Trinity, could contribute to repositioning children from the margins to a place of honour and dignity in society.

A relational view of the Trinity is conceptualised as a communion of mutual love, equality, inter-connectedness and interrelatedness, observed among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Tanner 2010:207; LaCugna 1991:391). Catherine LaCugna (1991:391) opines that "the primacy of communion among equals, not the primacy of one over another" is the relationship observed with the Triune God. She further argued that the reverse of this relational view is the source of dominion and abuse of power in our society. The concept of the Trinity as a model that should inform the quality of relationships within the Christian faith community and society has been explored by different scholars (Volf 1998; Moltmann 1991; LaCugna 1991). The relational view of the Trinity argues that the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit presents a relational view of God

that should characterise the life of Christians. This implies that the point of departure of any discourse of Christian understanding of human beings should be the Trinity.

Developing a Christian understanding of children through the lens of the Trinity could help shape the way we think about the agency, dignity, and humanity of children in a way that they are considered full human beings, created in the image of the Triune God. I argue that this view of children could help reframe our understanding of their lived experience of violence as well as a faith praxis that could eliminate the marginalisation and dehumanisation of children. Some scholars argue that "child-attentive" theologies will honour children and give them a voice (Bunge & Eide 2022:xvii; Konz 2019: 26). I believe that child-attentive theologies, when grounded in a relational view of the Trinity, could contribute significantly to recognising the agency, dignity, and full humanity of children. It could create a relational space in our societies in which power imbalances, which often underline the violence against children, are removed.

A Relational View of the Trinity

This section focuses on gleaning brief insights and contributions on a relational view of the Trinity by relevant scholars such as Jurgen Moltmann, Catherine LaCugna and Miroslav Volf. A relational view of the Trinity suggests that the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit presents a view of God that should characterise the life of Christians. Although a relational view of the Trinity is a relatively recent concept, it is considered the source of the revival and renaissance in the Trinitarian theological discourse (Kärkkäinen, 2017: xvi). In this study, a relational view of the Trinity is conceptualised as a communion of mutual love, equality, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness observed among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Tanner 2010:207; LaCugna 1991: 391). This understanding of the Trinity has dominated efforts to explicate a relational view of the Trinity that could provide a sounder framework for a Christian understanding of human beings and the quality of relationships that should exist in faith communities and extend to the larger society. A relational view of the Trinity, in the thoughts of Catherine LaCugna, is "the primacy of communion

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among equals, not the primacy of one over another" (1991:391). That is, the source of dominion and abuse of power in our society is the reverse of the quality of the relationship observed with the Triune God. Theologians believe this concept of the Trinity has shifted the discourse on the Trinity from an abstract, mystical, outdated concept, to an understanding that puts practical Christian life in the centre of the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, Pembroke remarks that "relationality is the central term in the new approach to the doctrine of the Trinity" (2006:10).

LaCugna (1991:338) also opines that the Trinity presents a relational concept in which there is no subordination between the Father and the Son or the Spirit. It is a kind of relationship of equality, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness (Tanner 2010:207; LaCugna 1991:391). This relationality observed in the Triune God offers no place for dominion and hierarchy. According to LaCugna, "the primacy of communion among equals, not the primacy of one over another, is the hallmark of the reign of the God of Jesus Christ" (1991:391). As the argument implies, the reverse of this relational view is the source of dominion and abuse of power towards those considered weak and inferior in our society (LaCugna 1991:393). Although LaCugna's

thesis was informed by the social injustice of the period, she believes this relational view of the Trinity is rooted in what is revealed about God in Scripture (1991:397). The practical implication is that when this quality of relationship exists in faith communities where the agency, dignity and humanity of children will be upheld. Children will not be seen as less important. As a result, children are more likely to receive humane treatment. Similarly, Patricia Wilson-Kastner (cited in LaCugna 1991:270-278) believes that the Trinity presents a divine relationship of mutuality, reciprocity, and freedom as key characteristics for communion with one another. Tanner, in her social Trinitarianism, also suggests a relationship of love and mutuality between God, the Father and God, the Son (2010:207). Tanner emphasises that, in living out this relationship, Christ becomes the model that should be followed (2012:370). LaCugna agrees with this position, stating that "living Trinitarian faith means living as Jesus Christ lived" (1991:60).

In Moltmann's vision, the doctrine of the Trinity is the only discursive approach to God. Moltmann contends that the doctrine of the Trinity is the "christianization of the concept of God" (1991:10). Moltmann also uses the concept of '*Imago Trinitas*' to drum home his relational view of the Trinity. He argued that since human beings are created in God's image, they are expected to live out that image on earth (1985:241), and that image is the image of the Trinity. He bases this argument on Jesus's prayer that "they may all be one, just as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21, ESV). Moltmann believes that this prayer is a call into the fellowship of human beings with Jesus, which is expected to reflect in our theological anthropology of human beings as well as the life of believers in society. The Father through the Son makes human beings conform to God's image on earth, and that image is the image of the Trinity (Moltmann 1985:243). The implication is that we are not just called to imitate the Trinitarian relationship, but we exist in it and mould our beings in it.

Moltmann is critical of the notion that human beings (as the image of God) are limited to God's rule over creation, and proposed that it should be extended to Imago Trinitas, that is, that the relationship between the Father, the Son and the

Holy Spirit is "represented in the fundamental human communities and is manifested in them through creation and redemption" (Moltmann 1985:242). This implies that our communities should be fashioned in ways that reflect the whole image of God. The argument put forth here is that "if the whole human being is designated the image of God, then true human community – the community of the sexes and the community of the generations – h as the same designation" (Moltmann 1985:241). In other words, Moltmann envisions a community in which the construction of personhood, as well as the relationship between men and women, parents and children, rich and poor reflects the whole and true image of God.

Similarly, Volf (1998:4) argues that ecclesial communion should reflect the Trinitarian communion. He attempted to develop a "non-hierarchical but truly communal ecclesiology based on a non-hierarchical doctrine of the Trinity" (1998:4). The implication is that building a community which lives out non-hierarchical characteristics such as love, peace, joy, mutuality and righteousness foster relationships between persons and communities.

Overall, it is argued that a relational view of the Trinity has practical implications for the Christian understanding of people and faith praxis in faith communities and society (Marmion & Nieuwenhove 2010:12). The belief in the Triune God, is consistent with the notion that human beings are created in the image and the likeness of God (Gen 2:26). It is indicative that human beings are called to share in the dynamics of the communion of the Triune God. This, indeed, the proponents of a relational view of the Trinity argues, has important practical "implications for anthropology, ecclesiology, and society" (Marmion & Nieuwenhove 2010:2).

Theological Anthropology of Children

Faith praxis with regard to children is often provided from some framework of anthropological hermeneutics. McEvoy (2019) argues that there is an indispensable need to put forth a theological anthropology of children for faith praxis in the contemporary church due to the increasing levels of violence against children in faith communities and also in society. Anthropology is the understanding of human beings. It entails the views that are held about the human nature. Van Arkel (2000)

observes that developments in pastoral ministry in faith communities brought to the fore the renewed interest in the role of anthropology in pastoral care. Heitink (1998:86) argued that although pastoral responses are explicit, these actions are largely influenced by the implicit views held about the people who received the care. This anthropological view can be conscious or unconscious and influences faith praxis (Brunsdon 2019:1-2; Heitink 1998:86). Brunsdon opines that a theological anthropology should encompass "a Christian understanding of another person, who and what someone is in the light of God's covenant love, through the redemption of Christ and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit" (2019:3). In effect, Brunsdon suggests that a Christian view of humanity should be rooted in the Triune God. This implies that a theological anthropology should be grounded in the Christian understanding of human beings, and children are not an exception. It calls for views of children that are consistent with the Christian God, and that recognises the full humanity of children. This is because, recognising the full humanity of children will help us critically re-examine doctrines and practices by raising questions about their lived experiences (Bunge & Eide 2022: xiii).

The implication is that the views and understandings held about children in the faith community form part of the hermeneutical framework from which faith praxis is undertaken. Mtata (2009:97) asserts that faith communities as well as theological reflection in Africa have sometimes followed the African construction of personhood that put children as a lower class of human beings at the subconscious level. This has contributed to the dehumanisation and violence against children in African communities.

In the African communitarian ethos, one would have thought that African communities would hold views about all members that are liberating and nurturing each other. Is this the case in African society, including faith communities? The ubuntu notion of communal living could be described as ubuntu for adults (who are given full personhood) and ubuntu for children (who are not given full personhood). Mtata argues that African societies have not been as communitarian as it was portrayed and that "the African person was and is the hierarchical person" (2009:98). The construction of personhood in African communities has been

male-dominated to the extent that children are not given full personhood. African theological reflections appear to have followed this line of marginalisation over the years. This creates a community and a relational space in which there is an imbalance of power, thereby hindering flourishing together. However, faith communities could hold views about all members, especially the marginalised like children, that are consistent with the nature of the Christian God when the Trinity informs those views. Therefore, I argue that the Trinity should be a framework for theological anthropology. This is consistent with Jenson's observation that the Trinity is not a "separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology's puzzles are to be solved" (1997:31).

In addition, the Trinity is adhered to by different denominations and Christian faith traditions in Africa. As a result, theological discourse on the Trinity in Africa cuts across denominations and theological traditionswhich Sakupapa refers to the Trinity as "ecumenical discourse" (2019:2). The relational notion of the Trinity has gained wider attention in African theological discourse also due to its emphasis on community life, and the fact that it is connected to the African communitarian ethos (Sakupapa, 2019:3). As a result, African theologians such as Mwoleka (1975), Oduyoye (2000), Orobator (2008), Ogbonnaya (1994), Bitrus (2018), and Sakupapa (2019) underscored the relevance of the Trinity for human community and life. Commenting on the practical implication of the Trinity, Mwoleka (1975:204) observed that the Trinity is not abstract, but a model to be followed. This is because the three Divine persons are one and share everything in a way that does not make them three, but one. Mwoleka held that the African notion of socialism implies sharing life and flourishing together. Similarly, Bitrus opined that "an authentic African tradition of community is that which lives out the just, egalitarian, and inclusive life of the Triune God" (2018:187). As a result, Bitrus (2018:56–159) suggests Trinitarian relationality as a moral model for communal life. I argue that, for us to share life together and to aim at flourishing together in the authentic African communitarian ethos, our views about the different members of the community should be consistent with the Trinity, which is construed as the basis of communal life. This understanding is more likely to promote flourishing together in a relational space that is foreign to power imbalance, domination and discrimination, which could be considered the roots of violence against children.

Towards a Theological Anthropology of Children Informed by the Trinity

In this section, I investigate how a relational view of the Trinity informs a theological anthropology of children. How can this view inform a faith praxis that will eliminate dehumanisation and violence against children? The answers to these questions are not simple and straightforward. However, key insights will be drawn from the Trinity to inform a hermeneutical framework of the understanding of children, which invariably influences faith praxis.

According to Medley (2002:2), we are called into the Christian faith to bear the image of the Trinity. It also calls for building faith communities that reflect the Trinitarian communion (Volf 1998:4). Thus, building a community that lives out non-hierarchical characteristics such as love, peace, joy, mutuality and righteousness for relationships between persons. Although it sometimes appears as if the way and manner children are treated could lead to the suggestion that children are created in an image that is inferior to the image in which adults are created, it is important to underscore the fact that our belief in the Christian God—the Trinity is inconsistent with any suggestion that the value of children is different from that of an adult. Both adults and children are created in the same image of God (Gen 1:26) and there is only one image and likeness of the Triune God (Gen 2:7). Moltmann disagrees with the assertion that human beings, as the image of God, is limited to God's rule over creation and proposed that it should extend to *Imago Trinitas*, that is, the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as "represented in the fundamental human communities and is manifested in them through creation and redemption" (Moltmann 1985:242).

This implies our communities should be fashioned in ways that reflect the whole image of God. The argument put forth here is that "if the whole human being is designated the image of God, then true human community ? the community of the sexes and the community of the generations has the same designation" (Moltmann 1985:241). This idea

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of "rule" could partly contribute to the exercise of power and dominion over every aspect of creation that is perceived as inferior to those who have the power to rule. Consequently, it is difficult to create a relational space for all creation as observed in the Trinity. The faith community is made of individuals who are called by God the Father through the Son into fellowship in the power of the Spirit (Smit 2015:11). This is a fellowship of mutual relationship that first exists in the Trinity. LaCugna described this as fellowship with the notion of "primacy of equals and not primacy of one over the other" (LaCugna 1991:391). This is a community and fellowship of people with the same image of God. This notion promotes the effort to build communities in which a safe relational space is created for its members, including the marginalised and vulnerable.

The concept of people in relationship is an important idea that should form part of how we view children as part of the community. Children should be construed as persons in mutual relationships with other human beings (adults and other children). This idea is consistent with the notion of relational anthropology and a theology about the 'web of creation' by Dillen (2011). She observes that the literature presents two main views of children: the 'liberationist' view (child participation); and the 'care' view (child protection). She argues that these two do not oppose each other but should be held in a fine integration when working from the paradigm of relational anthropology. Accordingly, she contends that "relational anthropology places the dignity of both the child and the parent centrally and sees them as interconnected in a relation of give and take from the beginning" (2011:214).

This interconnectedness is a mutual relationship, which exists in communion with the Father, Son and Spirit. The Trinitarian communion becomes the framework from which children are viewed. In an attempt to connect relational anthropology to creation, Dillen opines that "this relational anthropology can be theologically grounded in the view of creation as an 'interconnected web of relationships' rather than a 'fixed hierarchical ordering', where people have an ontological or natural place and status" (2011:214). The web of relationships implies a shift from hierarchy to asymmetry—different positions—and advocates that although the position of parent and children, as well as power, may vary, the respect and dignity of both children and adults remain mutual in these relational spaces. Consequently, children come into the relational spaces as those who can give and take something from the relationship, that is, as vulnerable and agents at the same time. Dillen concludes that "recognition of both the asymmetry on the one hand and the change in the balance of give and take over time and the mutuality of giving and taking on the other hand, is very important, both for parent-child relations as for other relational spaces, in order to respect the dignity of both parties"(2011:215). Asymmetry and mutuality are qualities that are prominent in a relational view of the Trinity.

Moltmann argues that the Trinity presents a clear case of persons in a relationship that is, the Father exists in the Son and the Son exists in the Father and so it also applies to the Spirit. Consequently, he opined that each Person receives the fullness of eternal life from the other (1991:173-174). Through this notion, each person looks out for the other person. This is consistent with the African concept of ubuntu, which states 'I am because of you'. It, therefore, suggests that one exists because of others' existence. Similarly, the idea is about the community of friends. Children should be seen as part of this community of friends and the children themselves should experience this friendship in freedom. Moltmann contends that friendship in freedom is the epitome of the relationship with God, a relationship of liberating men, women, and children (1993a:316). It is the friendship that emanates from Christ and is extended to all members, including those who are forsaken, and suffering. According to Kotzé and Noeth (2019:7),

the idea of friendship creates a public space to recognize the dignity of one another and to participate in the lives of others.

A relational view of the Trinity should be reflected in the faith praxis and spirituality that hold an understanding of children that is consistent with the full image of God—the *Imago Trinitas*. This is more likely to produce a sound theological anthropology of children. It should be rooted in a theological understanding that is consistent with the entire Gospel. A theological anthropology of children should be informed by our systematic theologies of children, especially children at risk. Kpalam and Light (2020:70-71) proposed a theology of children at risk with components as follows: (i) God as the good shepherd who cares for his sheep, including the vulnerable, weak, marginalised and poor in the church and society, especially widows and orphans; (ii) children are precious in the sight of God and Christian parents and churches have the responsibility to treasure and protect them; (iii) God's universal salvific plan includes children, another most powerful reason for caring for them so that no stumbling blocks to coming to faith, discipleship and opportunities for ministry are placed in their path; (iv) demonstrating the importance Scripture places on godly, able leadership in the home, church and society which necessitates a safe environment for raising children to be such leaders in the present and grow to become leaders in the future; and (v) child rearing that ensures that there is no abuse. This implies that our theological anthropology of children should consider children as important in the sight of God, just as all other human beings are, from the perspective of the Triune God. As a result, God's plans to restore all creation to himself include children. The fact that the Missio Dei includes children places the onus on the faith communities to recognise the dignity and full humanity of children just as Jesus Christ modelled and created an environment where nothing blocks their coming to the Lord (Matt 18:1-6; Mark 10:13-16).

Commenting on the view of children, Bunge (2008:353) argues that children are created in the image of God and they are also gifts from the Lord to families and societies. Making reference to Psalm 127:3, namely; "children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him", she advocates for an environment where children

and adults respect and enjoy each other. It could be said that this atmosphere, where children feel accepted, welcomed, and respected by adults and vice versa can be truly achieved in a community which is founded in a relational view of the Trinity.

Conclusion

To this end, our theological anthropology of children should be the one that views children as created in the same image of God just as adults. And that image is the image of the Triune God. It is in this image that children's dignity and respect are consistent with that which is accorded to all human beings created in the image of God. It holds that children are precious in the sight of God, and they are also called into the relationship with the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because they are part of God's salvific plan, he places the responsibility on adults to guide and nurture them in faith to grow in order to attain the full measure of Christ. However, this responsibility to guide does not mean they are inferior in the body of Christ. Children are considered a model of faith in Christ Jesus; hence adults can also learn some elements of faith from them. This notion makes a powerful reason to build a faith community in which all members are valued and given the dignity that is rooted in the image of the Triune God. In this view of children, and for that matter of all members of the community, it is more likely for power to be used in life-giving ways amongst parties that enjoy equal worth. It is therefore imperative to recognise that holding this view is critical to ensure an environment that honours the agency, dignity and humanity of children and eliminates all forms of abuse and dehumanisation of children in Africa.

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