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Chapter 5. Children's rights in research about religion and spirituality

> An erudite theologian suspected of being a heretic was asked by a journalist, "Do you believe in God?" He replied cautiously, "I can answer you but the answer is complex and I can promise you that you will not understand my answer. Do you want me to go ahead?" "Certainly," said the journalist. "All right. The answer is yes" (Barraclough 1999:929).

The theologian's replies raise questions for research about religion and spirituality. How can we explore complexity within children's and adults' seemingly simple, transparent, religious beliefs? In secular societies, how can we conduct convincing research about spirituality as the "sense of connections between the individual and the surrounding world" (Lundskow, 2008:3), and between humans and other species experienced in terms of mystery and awe, generosity and gratitude (Beck 1992)? Spirituality may involve transcendence and intimations of holiness (Zinnbower *et al.* 1997). It may be the expression of "our deepest selves" (Roof 1993), and our search for connectedness and meaning (Benson et al. 2003:205-6).

"Factual" scientific empiricism, which accepts only data that can be sensed and tested, dominates much social research, including research about religion. Fundamentalists, both religious and atheist, share starkly literal readings of sacred texts and concepts such as "deity" and are eager to prove or disprove the "truth." Given this empirical emphasis, are there authentic and respectful ways to research how children experience religion and spirituality beyond the physical and social domains? And are we confined to trying to observe and describe religious behaviors and reported beliefs objectively, meaning without judgment? This chapter will review children's rights in ethical research, and then consider key questions about religion and spirituality raised by founding sociologists. I will then consider approaches in current research, followed by some ideas on ways forward in rights-respecting research about children and religion.

Research about children tends to concentrate on small scale, personal approaches separated from "adult," global, political concerns. Yet children and religion can only be understood within wider "adult" or whole societies, beyond the separate bubble called childhood, which is the changing sets of beliefs or theories about what children are and should be like, in contrast to real living children. This chapter therefore also connects research methods with the theories that inform them, theories being definitions and meanings, explanations, and hidden assumptions. Theories shape the whole nature and process of how researchers select and manage their methods, questions and samples, data, findings and conclusions.

Theories of religion and childhood that are hidden and taken for granted within a society can be obvious to outsiders. For example, Nancy Sheper-Hughes (1992) showed how very poor women in Brazil, forbidden to use contraceptives by the Roman Catholic church, managed to feed most of their many children by denying food to some of their babies, and treating them as "angel children" who wanted to die. Priests supplied the coffins and local children would bury the babies. Aravind Adiga (2010) showed how the precarious survival

of slum children in Indian cities is further complicated when adults decide to assist or abuse them depending on whether the child is Muslim or Hindu, and so to justify adult cruelty as moral and religious. When facing the greatest spiritual challenge, a slow death, children in an Illinois cancer ward talked among themselves about dying, but submitted to their parents' denial and ignoring of their hints, and to extremely aggressive and painful, yet futile, treatments. In this study, the researcher Myra Bluebond-Langner (1978:232) asked Jeffrey aged 6 years, "Why do you always yell at your mother?" He replied, "Then she won't miss me when I've gone." His mother replied, "Jeffrey yells at me because he knows I can't take it. He yells so I have an excuse for leaving," raising questions about who was the most informed and mature person, the mother or the child. Bluebond-Langner (1978:254) said she directed her rage about the children's suffering and loss at "this country for its priorities on spending [and on] a God I am not quite sure exists, but who deserves to be blamed just the same."

The examples illustrate challenges to children's embodied welfare, survival and spiritual rights when, like many adults, they are theorized as not real people, when they suffer within global economic systems of extreme poverty but also certain costly excessive medical treatments, and when religion is invoked to justify abuse. Although Bluebond-Langner long ago vividly conveyed the profound understanding that young children can attain during life-threatening experiences, this is still widely denied. For example, it took us over two years gradually to convince a leading Bioethics Center that our similar findings were generalizable and therefore worth publishing and were not simply about exceptional "outliers" (Alderson et al. 2006). Rights-respecting research about children and religion therefore begins by seeing children, like adults, as fully human members of both local and global societies.

Children as rights holders

It is widely held that rights holders are mature and rational adult persons. However, other chapters in this book illustrate that children can be mature and rational in matters of religion (see also, for example, Roehlkepartain *et al.* 2006). This suggests that they can qualify as rights holders too. Rights are not clearly correlated with age or competence or maturity, as demonstrated when irrational and dangerous adults retain their rights. Some moral philosophers have asserted that children's rights to freedom of expression and religion are ill conceived because they "jeopardize the family as an institution" (Brighouse 2002: 9), and because infants lack agency and are like people in a coma or with severe Alzheimer's (Griffin 2002). However, children's early courage and commitment to their faith was shown, for example, by Quaker children in Reading, England. After the 1662 Quaker Act was passed, all Quakers aged over 16 were imprisoned and their Meeting House was locked. Yet, despite being harassed and beaten, the children continued to hold silent Meeting in the street (Westhill Friends 2010). Paul Connolly's sociology team (Connolly et al. 2002) found that 3 year olds in Northern Ireland were aware of cultural and political differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian names and flags.

The inclusive view of inalienable rights from birth has religious origins in beliefs about God-given respect for the sacred in human nature (Woodiwiss 2005). The 1776 American *Declaration of Independence* states: "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC 1989) attests that "recognition of the inherent dignity

and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." The UNCRC has been ratified by 193 (of 195) states, a strong international treaty. The UNCRC's 42 main articles can broadly be divided into: provision rights ("to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" (Article 27), to education and healthcare); protection rights (from abuse, neglect, discrimination, cruel and degrading treatment and exploitation); "participation" rights, or modified forms of adult autonomy (rights to life, to form and express views though not to make decisions, freedoms of information and expression, privacy and family life, of association and peaceful assembly, of thought, conscience and religion). Freedom of religion, for example, assures every child's right to be welcomed and nurtured into their family and community religion, from the religious ceremonies after birth onwards, without fear of discrimination or persecution. Like adult rights, child rights are qualified and not absolute. They must avoid harm to others, and must respect public health, order, and morals, with extra protections for children's safety, best interests and family life.

Rights-respecting and ethical research aims to ask worthwhile questions, to engage with valid theories and methods, and to be well designed, conducted and reported (Alderson and Morrow 2010). Through every stage of a project from first plans to final dissemination, researchers need to strive to balance their probing investigation and analysis with respect for children's rights to be heard "in all matters affecting the child" (UNCRC Article 12), and also with respect for children's rights to protection from harm, exploitation, and undue invasion of their privacy. This involves avoiding over-intrusive questions, and critical or dismissive comments that could humiliate children during data collection, analysis and reporting. It also involves not overprotecting children to the extent of silencing and excluding them from research and from the potential to inform policy, practice, and public opinion and debate. Respect can be especially vital when researching such intimate and sensitive topics as spirituality and religion, which relate as noted earlier to both personal micro-concerns and also to political and economic macro concerns, which affect children's basic rights to life, survival, and wellbeing. Children may be embarrassed to speak about private thoughts and, for example, about living in a violent area where it is hard to practice their religion.

Children tend to be doubly excluded from the "adult" research world. First, specialists in politics, economics, trade, work, law, theology, ethics, rights, and ecology seldom mention children although, now and in the future, many present matters will affect children more and over a longer time than they affect adults. Second, research about children tends to be limited to psycho-social inquiry into their education, care, play, development, and personal experiences. The social study of childhood has raised awareness of children's considerable capacities and agency, and shown how they are far more like adults than has been traditionally assumed (James and Prout 1997; Alderson 2008). Yet, paradoxically, childhood research still also often misleadingly confines children into separate, apolitical spaces fairly isolated from the above "adult" matters. such as the present global economic and housing crises. Yet the immense effects include debts being left for younger generations to repay. And when a home is repossessed children may also lose their neighborhood, school, friends, and place of worship with its whole community.

In another separation, research reports about children and religion tend to be in specialist literature and not in generic collections (such as James and Prout 1997; Franklin 2002; Lewis et al. 2004; Christensen and James 2008; Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010). One

British collection of 25 papers about youth work unusually included a paper on religion-- only one. However, more youth workers are employed by the Church of England than by all the other agencies, and the paper concluded:

> The flawed assumption that secularism is neutral has led to a culture where faith-based work is progressively inhibited…particularly with the rising fear of religious extremism and, to a lesser extent, of organized religion in general. Secularism is communicated and imposed on a daily basis through the media, school, youth work and other role models, whereas evangelistic Christian youth work faces increasing opposition to its message (Clayton and Stanton 2008:117).

Researchers might examine young people's views on the seeming paradox of "rising fear….of organized religion" in Britain, where church and state are so intertwined, versus strong support for organized religion in the U.S., where church and state are officially separate.

So far, this chapter has suggested that in order to understand children's and young people's own experiences and views about religion, researchers need to relate to them as real human beings, and not as undeveloped pre-beings. Respect for children includes attention to their rights through the research topics, theories and methods, besides attention to influences on children and their religion from politics, economics and other "adult" matters beyond a supposed separate "world of childhood."

Questions from the sociology of religion 1820-1920

Earlier sociologists traced powerful connections between religion and the rest of life, raising vital questions for research with people of all ages. Connected to the root word for ties (ligation), religion denotes both potentially negative restrictive bonds but also positive enabling human ties and webs of relationships; each version of religion gives active form to spirituality meaning whole or holy. This section draws on Robert Nisbet's history of the sociology of religion. Nisbet considered that sociology is the only social science to examine how religio-sacred myth, ritual, and sacrament inform secular life (1967:221-263). Sociology perceives human nature and society as intrinsically moral, instead of assuming that secular, economic, utilitarian, self-interested, and competitive doctrines are "the essential and sufficing pillars of social analysis" (1967:221). Nineteenth century European sociologists, although they were mainly atheists, regarded religion as an integral foundation of society, implanting a deep sense of unity, and promoting both social order and individual thought. Alexis de Tocqueville saw in religion the source of human conceptions of meaning and order, and of duty and true human nature, promoting wisdom and virtue as safeguards from paralyzing fear, disorder, and tyranny. Emile Durkheim traced to religion the historical origins of human intellect, language, philosophy, and science, concepts of time and space, and the sacred bonds of the social contract. Contrasting the sacred with the profane and secular, Durkheim explored how religions can deepen shared experiences of joy and sorrow and moral values, and can thereby defuse divisive individualism and anomie.

Max Weber (1978) also raised questions about differences between religious and secular values. He regarded the original charismatic religious leaders (for example, Buddha and Christ) as revolutionary, anti-tradition, and anti-wealth. Yet their teachings quickly became routinized by their successors into dogma, ritual, law, and hierarchy, transforming their

initial ideas on love, justice, and equity into the opposing values of acquiring wealth and power. Weber analyzed how large social changes depend on many influences including people's deep values, motives, and meanings - their religion. He explored capitalism's religious origins in the sixteenth century. Work, wealth, and profit have always been tolerated and enjoyed as well as being morally challenged, but gradually they have become "ethically compelling and morally sovereign" (Nisbet 1967:259). God's calling (vocation) and blessing are now much associated with prosperity and wealth. Georg Simmel understood human behaviors and relationships through piety: "the strange mixture of selfless devotion and desire, of humility and elation, of sensual immediacy and spiritual abstraction" beyond sheer egoism, "an emotion of the soul" which includes faith "in the power, the merit, the irresistibility and goodness of the other" (Simmel 1908/1959:23, 33). The founding sociologists generally aligned spirituality with mature manhood. However, their histories of "primitive" religions, in which religion precedes and forms, rather than grows out of, later social and intellectual developments, suggest an innate spirituality in everyone, including children.

Nisbet (1967: 229-31) identified four basic perspectives among founding sociologists who saw religion as:

 * an indispensable, integrating, unifying, social force - its communal bonds necessary to social order, and its sacred values necessary to moral consensus beyond secular reason and interest;

 * a key to understanding and explaining historical and social change and their context in human values and motives;

*   a sacred mystery involving rites and hierarchy that lend meaning, symbol and power to secular concepts of community, family and individuality, status, authority and society;

*   a sense of divine majesty and sacred imperatives, originally fundamental to the first development of human thought and belief, of language and loyalty.

Current political, economic, and ecological crises raise these kinds of spiritual concerns, in formal religious teaching and in broader questions of ethics, values, piety and charismatic leadership in troubling times. One example relating to all these questions occurred during spring 2010, when oil deep-mined by BP (formerly British Petroleum) gushed into the Gulf of Mexico. How does the disaster challenge the rights of present and future societies to obtain fuel at such high cost to the environment and surrounding neighborhoods? How might religious concepts of a sacred creation, human solidarity, and the heritage bequeathed to younger generations contribute to the mainly economic and engineering debates?

The founding sociologists' questions, their methods of analysis and their profound conclusions are valuable in today's research about children and religion. The questions and research areas include: How can we best care now for present and future generations, children and adults, and for the planet and other species? What part can or should religion and ideas of the sacred play in today's global decisions? How far can "religion" be stretched to describe any shared passion, however secular, such as sport or consumerism? How do children and young people experience and discuss these kinds of questions of religion and spirituality, the good person and the good society?

Contemporary research

This section considers how researchers can share respect, trust and rapport with children who have devout beliefs that the researcher may or may not share. Dismissive relativism rejects accounts of faith, which by definition cannot be verified by scientific methods. Should researchers treat children's accounts as personal constructions, when it is irrelevant whether they are true or false? The philosopher Roger Trigg's view could apply to any kind of genuine faith. He asks, "Is Christianity true?" If sociologists say they do not deal with matters of truth and belief in religion or science, Trigg considers that they fail "to take seriously the fact that to the person holding it, the most important aspect is that *it is true* [and] ignoring [their truth] can appear tantamount to assuming their falsity" (emphasis in original) (Trigg 1985:36). Varying approaches to religion in contemporary research address the question of respecting children's (and adults') rights in terms of taking their beliefs seriously. They include mythos, common origins, children's views, education and therapy, non-judgmentalism and dialectical critical realism.

Mythos. The theologian Karen Armstrong's (2009) approach to the sacred regards God not as fact but as meaning, and religion as practically acquired experiential knowledge. This was well understood in the past, Armstrong notes, when people read sacred texts for mythos: to make sense of creation, suffering, life, and death, and to learn how to practice compassion, altruism, and solidarity. During the Enlightenment, the Bible came to be read for logos: literal, factual, scientific realism. "Belief," although it is etymologically connected to "love" and commitment, was altered by logos into a checklist of opinions. Mythos, however, can research the transcendent meaning and relevance their faith has to each participant. So when children talk about their faith, their views cannot be tested empirically but may be taken as valid in the context and meaning of their own experiences and relationships. In complex sensitive research that can transcend literal meanings, Karen Winter's (2010) methods are helpful. They avoid potentially intimidating eye-to-eye contact. The researcher sits next to the child and they talk while the child uses craft materials to decorate a small cardboard box with images of the self on the outside and of "wishes and feelings" on the inside.

Common origins. Weber (1978) and Armstrong (1993) reviewed how beyond the diverse trappings of each faith are their common origins and they noted how all major European and Asian charismatic religions dating from 900-200 BCE began in revulsion against violence and inequality. Like principled humanism, Indian yoga teachers ("spirit" means breath and "yoga" refers to breathing), Confucius, Buddha, the Greek tragedies, the Jewish Torah and Prophets, the Gospels and the Qur'an all advocated practical non-violent, non-egotistical responses and they shared the golden rule of respect and compassion (feeling with others) that supports justice, peace, and solidarity. Faith in the common original precepts supported the pluralist mingling of religions: Islam with Hinduism in the Asian subcontinent and with Christianity around the Mediterranean. In India, for example, this fostered gentle Hindu/Sufi cults of countless local gods and goddesses and spirits who blessed specific fields and wells. Carefully researched novels (de Bernières 2005) and accounts by and about child soldiers (for example, Beah 2007) powerfully convey the devastation for children when wars fought in the name of religion tear apart their once peacefully mixed communities. The writer William Dalrymple (2008) who specializes in Eastern religions traced the loss of the older though still surviving faiths to

modern standardized religions, which are Western in being systematic, centralized and based on logos, literal readings of texts. The modern sects meet the desires of powerful and literate new urban middle classes, and are increasingly political, conservative, intolerant, violent, nationalist and fundamentalist. Like the European Reformation during the birth of capitalism, they seek to destroy the art, music, dancing and architecture of older religions. The newer forms of Asian and Arabic religions emerged during resistance to European colonialism and later Western imperialism. Today, violent "Islamic" resistance is met by "Christian" leaders' greater force. Each side contradicts the original peaceful precepts of their faiths, and demonstrates how, if they are to be understood, children's faith and religious education need to be researched within their political, social, economic and often military contexts.

Contrasts between original and later forms of many religions illustrate Weber's model of transition from initial revolutionary charisma (supporting the poor and humble) to later routinized charisma (supporting the rich and mighty). The transition is vividly summarized in concepts of the child. Jesus the charismatic radical preached: "Except you are converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3), advocating a kind of Socratic humble receptive simplicity. Jesus compared those who rejected his teaching with perverse children, while the wise children shouted to them in the market place, "We played the pipes for you but you would not dance, we sang dirges and you would not cry", adding "Wisdom is justified by all her children" (Luke, 8, 32). Only one generation later Paul, who translated the early spirit of Christianity into the formal letter of the law, reversed Jesus's teaching when he celebrated adult confidence and authority: "When I was a child I spoke as a child, understood as a child, thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as I am known" (Corinthians, 1, 13).

Children's views Some of the founding sociologists' questions may sound too complex for research with children. Yet during discussions about these topics, sometimes linked to drama, music, art, or natural settings, even young children refer in their own terms to concepts of charisma or piety and wonder in their lives (Roehlkepartain *et al.* 2006). Children's discussions about religion show their efforts to make moral and spiritual sense of their puzzling contradictory worlds. Harriet, when aged five years and attending a Church of England school, commented, "Christians believe that Jesus was born in Bethlehem" (personal communication). She neatly conveyed the uneasy relativism in current relationships between state, church, and school, and between parents, children, and teachers of all faiths and none. Amy aged nine and Robbie aged six years, while awaiting visits from both Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy, discussed Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods (personal communication 2009). They implicitly relied on concepts of truth in both mythos and literal logos when trying to order the plethora of pantheons children now encounter:

> Robbie: I don't believe in gods. . . .I believe in Egyptian gods 'cos they were real people, they put animal heads on them.
> Amy: I'm not sure I really believe in Jesus. Maybe he was born a baby. He was accidentally caught up in something. He was loved, so maybe people say he will live forever and be son of God. Nobody's really sure, but something has to be true. He's so famous and everybody's believed in it for thousands of years, but it was 2,000 years ago and no one is left to tell the proper truth.

[Discussion of how the world started.]
Robbie: What I think how the world started is I think a long time ago. . . .there was just one planet and soon a comet or something hit it, then it turned into loads of planets and they called them names after the gods they think are true. I don't really know. . . .I think people and our planet will be extinct soon and maybe the world will start again [talk of litter and felling too many trees].

Asked for their views about angels, other young children showed the same thoughtful piecing together of many disparate pieces of information and disciplines ranging from philosophy, theology and the paranormal, to physics and engineering.

"I like angels because they have wings and they're magic and the angel made them back alive again. Well, he was like a spirit." "They make wishes come true." "The angels' wings are made of a sort of material; it's got to be a light material otherwise they wouldn't fly." "Don't forget it's all by air power." "Angels live in heaven with God they live in clouds." "I believe that when you die you become an angel and you live in heaven with God." "Nobody's ever even seen an angel and we like to know they could be real but it's good to know that it's always going to be a mystery." "Angels send messages from God to earth. . . .like the world should be peaceful, people should be polite and respect others" (French *et al.* 2007).

Comparison with earlier accounts shows how faithfully children reflect their time and place, and the importance of understanding their diverse accounts in broad contexts. In the past, very young Christian children memorized prayers and Bible verses and confessed their sins. George Monkford recalled being ten years old in 1836. After stealing apples, and stopping at the alehouse to hear singing he remembered: "O the guilt and fear I felt . . . .I kept repeating the Lord's prayer. . . .to keep the devil (as I thought) from grasping me. . . .the dread of hell and punishment of my sin often made me cry out, 'Do save me: do pardon me and I will lead a new life'" (Rosen 1994:93).

Although there are many studies of children's own views gathered through ethnographies and semi-structured interviews, I did not find any in research about religion. Rather than abstracted discussions and questionnaires, for example on the meaning of God, it could be more rewarding to explore with children the lived spiritual dimensions in their lives, and their unique insights, especially during adversity: serious illness or armed conflict, forced migration, or poverty (for example, Katz 2004; Beah 2007). Spiritual questions about their faith in God and in human goodness could be woven into such research. For example, secular research about child asylum seekers has spiritual overtones. The sociologists (Pinson et al. 2010) found that British children from around 7 years became horrified when young immigrants, who had become their school friends, were imprisoned or were due to be deported back to violent countries from which they had escaped. The British children with their teachers and parents mounted vigorous and sometimes successful protests. The researchers identified their growing political awareness and agency with a questioning of assumed values such as confidence in British justice, and with "the politics of compassion", solidarity and empathy with their peers.
Research for education and therapy Psychologists Don Ratcliff and Rebecca Nye (2006) intended to increase understanding, recognition, and nurturing of children's spirituality in all aspects of their lives, including effective treatments for "negative spirituality" in youth crime and violence. They aimed to strengthen agreed qualitative and quantitative, longitudinal and international methods of research about spirituality with children of all

ages. They were cautious about Piagetian stages and the risks of misrepresenting spirituality's complexity, depth and fluidity. They worried that teaching *about* God might displace experience *of* God, and they believed that "children are more than potential, are whole persons now. . . .deeply spiritual both in their day-to-day lives as well as in those moments of connectedness to Transcendence. . . ." (2006:481). This implies that spirituality is innate, although it might unfold or deepen or emerge through fuller articulate consciousness. However, they were also concerned with "scientific rigor", clear definitions, measurements and comparisons of incremental (developing rather than present) spirituality, and they aimed to generalize from, predict, and evaluate children's responses in different contexts. There are unresolved tensions between the authors' interpretive and more positivist approaches. Questionnaires for statistical analysis can hardly capture complex ambiguous replies, of the kind quoted at the beginning of this chapter. And as the children quoted earlier illustrate, their responses may reflect what they have been told rather than some universal age-based spiritual development.

Nonjudgmentalism Some researchers aim to be value-free. The sociologist George Lundskow (2008) considers that religion is not primarily about objective, observable, measurable truth, but is rather derived from emotion and experience. Lundskow aims to examine contingent constructed meanings impartially, and to see how religious beliefs and mores reflect, reinforce and explain social mores. He explores what religions mean to the devout, although he gives some extreme examples that challenge his neutral stand (2008:372, 393) of faiths that deny their founding values and propound autonomy and choice in spirituality as if it is a commodity. One example, from Smith and Denton (2005:143), is that most North American young people today say that faith is important to them. However, they tend to see religion in terms of "moralistic therapeutic deism. . . .profoundly individualistic. . . .[they presume] autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal norm and life goal. . . .an invisible and pervasive doxa. . . .unrecognized, unquestioned." Individuals freely call on God for help when they desire it, as they would employ commercial products or services, and as freely they ignore God at other times. They also ignore other people's interests, without commitment or self-sacrifice or any sense of community.

Another example (Lundskow 2008:391-5) is evangelical mega-churches, where many congregations are poor and Black. The leaders collect millions of dollars from them, use tax avoidance schemes, and translate Christianity into simple misleading messages to present Jesus as a business entrepreneur and profits as God's blessing. The leaders pressure congregations into supporting Republican policies, which especially favor inequality, while lobbying and donating vast funds to Republican politicians. The most disadvantaged groups are most likely to vote against state aided healthcare and against higher taxes for the rich (Reynolds 2005), and one third of them believe they will live to see the apocalyptic end of the world (Hochschild 2005). Such a meeting of religious, political, and economic beliefs fits Weber's view that secular societies disenchant religion. The beliefs powerfully affect young people directly and indirectly. The worship of wealth demands that richer children spend billions of dollars each year, while very low paid child workers produce many of the goods. The system has to be fed by growing demand, fuelled by advertising when hundreds of slogans, brands, and logos particularly target children daily, deeply influencing their moral beliefs, values and aspirations (Klein 2000; Beder 2009). Meanwhile, global trade, investment and speculation, property bubbles, mining, and logging all leave great economic and ecological debts for decades ahead, which younger generations will have to repay, and raise religious questions about respect

for justice and the environment. Lundskow's veto, on judging how moral and authentic religious sects are, could be solved by assessing the sects, not against arbitrary standards, but on how they set examples and teach children to honor or violate their faith's founding precepts reviewed earlier.

Dialectical critical realism (DCR) Some organized religions' close associations with extreme greed, oppression or violence can make religion-related value judgments seem especially suspect and "unscientific." Yet to describe oppressive religions without judgment can appear to condone them. Dialectical critical realism (DCR) denies that non-judgmental objectivity is possible and argues that facts and values are inseparable, recognizing moral values at the heart of all human life (Bhaskar 2008). DCR also separates the reality of independent *being* (children, churches) from *knowing* (how we perceive and interpret reality) and examines how we tend to collapse being into knowing, things into thoughts, real living capable children into stereotypes of childhood The philosopher Roy Bhaskar (2008:291-2) argues that in the writer's and reader's sincere searching together for truth and meaning, on which research depends, . freedom and truth are conditions of one another, and therefore honest communication implies shared commitment to the (sacred) ideals of human solidarity and universal human flourishing. DCR understands complex social life such as children and religion beyond child/adult, body/spirit dichotomies, on four interacting planes altogether: physical bodies and environment; interpersonal relationships, emotions and values; structures and institutions; and inner personality (flourishing, spiritual awareness of transcendence) (2008:160). The four planes offer rich methods of analysis of children's religions.

Douglas Porpora's (2001) DCR research analyzed contemporary self-interested attitudes towards God, divorced from any communal relationships or loyalties or shared respect for rights and justice. Such self-obsession develops, he argues, into either extreme individualist greed or fanatical dogmatic submission. Porpora contends that everyone needs (true) religion to validate moral meaning in life and in social justice, to guide thought and action, and to mediate between individuals and society within a cosmic vision. Porpora considers that being, meaning, and morality all coincide, and today's worship of corporate profit dominates us all, turning even our souls into commodities. He cites the Hindu concept, "avisya," when superficial concerns obscure deeper meaning in life. "As long as we are free to buy as much as we want of whatever we want at the lowest price, we are happy. We cease to notice that the real choices – what is made by whom, where and how – are no longer up to us" (Porpora, 2001:309). While infinite consumption exhausts the finite planet, DCR argues that we have to recognize alternatives, their absence and their potential, and a major question for research is how religions foster or challenge consumerist convictions, especially in younger generations.

Ways forward

The founding sociologists emphasized inter-dependence between religions and their social, political, economic, and natural world contexts. Their concerns are still highly relevant today in research about children and religion. The founders favored methods of describing, understanding and explaining rather than measuring data. To do justice to valid, ethical and complex research with children about religion and to respect their rights as real persons can involve using DCR approaches, which acknowledge how rights and spirituality are integral to all human concerns, actions, and relationships. Religious values

of the sacred and of solidarity have a lasting being and reality, as well as transient interpretations and practices. Researchers who share time and experiences with children on their terms are more likely to understand their views and explanations than researchers who use fairly fast, formal, standardized methods and questions.

 Present social, economic and ecological crises indicate pressing needs for adults and children to research and work and learn together interdependently towards dealing with these crises, in right-respecting partnerships that draw on religious traditions and spiritual reserves.

This chapter has reviewed approaches that can help to deepen our understanding of children's religion and spirituality. The approaches include ways to use rights-respecting research methods and theories, to see children as real persons, and to connect their lives into "adult worlds" by analyzing how politics, economics and other social structures intersect with religion. The approaches also draw on the profound insights of earlier sociologists and philosophers. Besides attending to the meaning in children's own accounts, researchers need to examine secular influences on today's faiths and religious education, and to assess these against the founding precepts that religions tend to share.

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