



## Protestant Theological University

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David M. Csinos, *Little Theologians. Children, Culture, and the making of Theological Meaning* (Montreal/London/Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

This book is well written and a source of knowledge about theological meaning-making of children in the United Church in Canada. It is written at the crossing point of children's spirituality and intercultural theology, with the aim to further develop the discipline of children's spirituality. Csinos has Hungarian roots and lives in Canada. More than half a century ago, Canada decided to embrace multiculturalism as an identity marker. More recently, the United Church in Canada also embraced multiculturalism as an identity marker in their vision for becoming intercultural.

Csinos studied the theological meaning making of children. He wanted to know if and how the participation of children in a particular congregation influences the process of theological meaning making. Therefore, he interviewed 19 children of four different congregations of the United Church. In the interviews, that took place in 2013 and 2014, he started with inviting the children to draw a picture of God. This method of drawing is frequently used in children's theology and proved its value in other studies as well. Csinos describes 'children's spirituality and theology' as an academic field with two different but related streams, namely studies that focus on the inner spiritual life of children and studies that focus on the experiences of children and childhood in the light of tradition and Scripture and religious experiences. His book contributes, in particular to the second stream in the field of children's spirituality and theology. He interviewed children in the age of 5–13 years old and also had a focus group with adults (including leaders, parents and volunteers) in each congregation. He created a portrait of four congregations: a culturally diverse congregation, an ethnic minority congregation, an ethnic majority congregation and an Aboriginal congregation. He included in his sample a variety of contextual factors, like urban and rural, size, and particular beliefs. So, culture in this study is not only a matter of language and ethnicity, but includes other factors that define culture. In the individual or small group (2–3) interviews with the children, the process of drafting as well as the drafts itself became the starting point for the further conversations about God, church, heaven and whatever theological topics the children brought forward. Some of the drafts are included in the book and provide the reader with an impression of the imagination of the children. Csinos his research is a theological and even pastoral journey qualified by ethnographic methods.

Csinos uses the trinitarian theory of Emmanuel Lartey on the distinction of a universalist, cultural and individual sphere of human life. This is a relevant theory with regard to his question. Csinos constructed a clear and convincing narrative of all three spheres in relation to the theological meaning making of the children. The first sphere, universalist, covers the overall aspect. For example, all children could describe a concept of God. And in all the congregations the theological meaning making of children is influenced by participating in the congregation. The sources are implicit or explicit theological convictions, like place for uncertainty in faith (a), or experiences like communal events as retreats and meals (b), or relationships in the congregation that incarnate a theology of love (c). Although all children use these sources, they do so to varying degrees. The second sphere, cultural, covers notions shared with others in a particular congregation. Here, the cultural influence comes forward. For example, the influence of a particular camp experience, it is characteristic in the theological meaning making of a particular group. The last sphere, individual, says something of a particular person, like a unique experience of someone, having a particular dream.

With regard to traceability of the interpretations of the cultural theological meaning making it would have been helpful if the author had elaborated on the process of analysis in a more extensive way. Although the practical theological method of Rick Osmer that is used gets some explanation, how the craftwork of analyzing exactly happened only gets two sentences in the introduction. Therefore, the reader, despite the lively examples that are given, does not know how the interpretations are exactly rooted in the interviews and focus groups. How are the theologies of the wider congregations exactly constructed? And does a certain characteristic of theological meaning making in one congregation means that it is absent in the other, or is it present in a different way? The reader definitely receives great examples of the interpretations that are made, but does not fully get a grip upon the analytical process behind it. Csinos argues that within the field of 'children's spirituality and theology' there needs to be more attention for the role and influence of the congregation. He distinguishes four categories of studies that include an (inter)cultural dimension and gives examples of each. The reader also does not get information about the way the literature review is done. Which studies are included in this review? There are only a few references to continental European studies on children's ministry while in particular in Germany it is a broad developed academic tradition, including studies on religious plurality (in schools). Perhaps these studies are hidden in the four categories described by Csinos.

Or does the field of 'children's spirituality and theology' need a better international and intercultural tuning?

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