

PROTESTANTISM

Much as, before Joan Kelly, we neglected to wonder whether women had a Renaissance, we still struggle to say whether children had a Reformation. The subject is scarcely less important: in most pre-modern societies, those under 20 accounted for half or more of the total population. The difference is that, in those societies where it became established, the Protestant Reformation certainly did not pass children by. The question is rather, to what extent was it something simply done to them, rather than something they and their experience shaped? What were its aspirations for them, and how did those match up to the reality? How did the religious lives of early modern children take shape in Protestant societies?

This subject has been systematically neglected. Historians of Protestantism have done so because our sources rarely confront us with the subject. The adult Protestants who created almost all our documents gave remarkably little attention to the religion, beliefs, spirituality or pious practice of children.¹ They seem to have regarded childhood – whether in general, or in their own or their families’ particular cases – as a treacherous and spiritually barren political stage which good Protestants ought to be concerned with simply in order to leave behind. More surprisingly, historians of childhood have also paid little attention to the subject, perhaps because the social-history milieu out of which the modern history of childhood emerged harbours deep secularising assumptions.

This neglect is slowly beginning to be addressed. The observation that the Reformation was a generational movement, even a revolt of the young, has spurred several scholars to think about how age structures affected the process of reform.² Some pioneering works have looked at the role of Protestantism in certain exceptional categories of children, such as martyrs, those involved in cases of witchcraft or possession, or – a category which embraced almost all children at some point – those facing serious illness.³ Later, more source-rich periods have also produced some important pioneering studies.⁴ An important recent work of literary scholarship has shown us how mothers’ and children’s Protestantism could nurture one another.⁵ As these works suggest, while this is an underdeveloped topic, it is not an impossible one. It is perfectly possible to reconstruct some of the contours of Protestant childhood in the early modern period. It is simply that the effort is at an early stage.

What follows is not, therefore, a comprehensive or authoritative overview of the subject, but some preliminary sketches towards it.⁶ Amongst its other limitations, the most severe is that its scope is almost entirely limited to a single Protestant culture, that of England. This should

¹ Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 229-30.

² Susan Brigden, ‘Youth and the English Reformation’, *Past and Present* 95 (1982), 37-67; Alexandra Walsham, ‘The Reformation of the Generations: Youth, Age and Religious Change in England, c. 1500-1700’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser. 21 (2011), 93-121.

³ Diana Wood (ed.), *The Church and Childhood* (Studies in Church History 31, 1994); Sarah Covington, ‘“Spared not from tribulation”: Children and Early Modern Martyrologies’, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 97 (2006), 165-83; Anna French, ‘Possession, Puritanism and Prophecy: Child Demoniacs and English Reformed Culture’, *Reformation* 13 (2008), 133-6; idem, *Children of Wrath: Possession, Prophecy and the Young in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2015); Hannah Newton, *The Sick Child in Early Modern England, 1580-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ Most notably, for this purpose, E. Brooks Holifield, ‘Let the Children Come: The Religion of the Protestant Child in Early America’ in *Church History* vol. 76 no. 4 (2007), 750-777.

⁵ Paula McQuade, *Catechisms and Women’s Writing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁶ Much although not all of what follows draws on discussions in my *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and in my ‘Facing Childhood Death in English Protestant Spirituality’ in Katie Barclay, Ciara Rawnsley, and Kimberley Reynolds (eds), *Death, Emotion and Childhood in Premodern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), 109-127.

not be taken to imply that England was normative for the Protestant or even for the Reformed world, but as a spur to others to deepen, complicate, corroborate and contradict the picture given here.

Depravity and its limits

The main reason for adult Protestants' systematic neglect of the religion of those below the age of about ten was theological: it was assumed that this period of life was a sink of iniquity and corruption, from which souls needed to be rescued as quickly and as firmly as possible. Firm discipline would keep the devil from fastening too tight a grip onto children, and godly education would prise his fingers off them, but actual holiness was not to be looked for while they remained in his realm. Lewis Bayly, in one of the seventeenth century's most widely circulated works of Protestant piety, included a meditation on childhood which asked, 'what is youth but an vntamed Beast? ... Ape-like, delighting in nothing but in toys and baubles?' Prayers written for children's use were untroubled by sentimentality about childish ways. Edward Hutchins' bestselling collection of prayers had schoolchildren ask God 'to crop the crooked boughes off, and to mowe downe the ripe haruest of wicked nature'.⁷ This was what most adult Protestants saw when they looked at childhoods, including their own. The theme of John Winthrop's brief account of his youth was his utter depravity. Only when he was ten did he begin to have 'some notions of God', and even so 'it made mee no whit better'. Thomas Goodwin dismissed his childish prayers as mere hypocrisy. Richard Kilby lamented 'the evill seasoning of mine heart in my tender yeeres'. He had had a dog and a cat whom he loved, along with 'other vaine things ... when mine heart should have been taken up, and filled with the love of God'.⁸

There is, of course, no-one whom it is easier to criticise and patronise than your own younger self. The theological assumption and autobiographical convention that childhood was a wasteland of depravity could not quite eradicate the fact that some children recalled intense experiences of Protestant piety, and some divines acknowledged that there were a few 'who in their tender yeeres by meanes of religious nurture haue beene seasoned with the grace of God, dropping by little and little into them'.⁹ The Cheshire puritan patriarch John Bruen claimed to have received his effectual calling as a child, and recalled finding 'unexpressible joys' in reading and prayer when aged six or seven. His biographer was clearly uneasy about this, but made the best of it, invoking an important counter-cultural model, St Augustine's *Confessions*, to argue that God may 'put some good motions of his Spirit even upon the hearts of children' – although he added that at best this only happens 'upon occasion now and then'.¹⁰

It was not perhaps quite so rare as he assumed. The radical Scots preacher Robert Blair was six when he had his first conversion. He was sick, and so left alone in the house while everyone else went to church one Sunday. Alone in a silent town, 'the Lord caused my

⁷ Lewis Bayly, *The Practise of pietie. Directing a Christian how to walke that he may please God* (RSTC 1604. London: [Felix Kingston for] John Hodgetts, 1620), 63; Edward Hutchins, *Dauids Sling against great Goliath* (RSTC 14010. London: Henry Denham, 1581), 104-6.

⁸ John Winthrop, *Winthrop Papers, vol. I: 1498-1628* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929), 154; Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D.D.* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), II.lvii-lviii; Richard Kilby, *Hallelujah. Praise yee the Lord, for the unburthening of a loaden conscience* (RSTC 14956.7. London: R. Young for James Boler, 1635), 35.

⁹ Daniel Dyke, *Two Treatises. The one, Of Repentance, The other, Of Christs Temptations* (RSTC 7408. London: Edward Griffin for Ralph Mab, 1616), 25.

¹⁰ William Hinde, *A Faithfull Remonstrance of the Holy Life and Happy Death, of Iohn Bruen* (Wing H2063. London: R.B. for Philemon Stephens and Christopher Meredith, 1641), 7-9.

conscience to reflect upon me with this query, Wherefore servest thou, unprofitable creature?’ – a query which a visiting preacher soon after helped him to answer.¹¹ Alice Wandesford reckoned she experienced ‘the first dawning of God’s Spirit in my heart’ when she was four. Hearing that God had made the stars moved her to ‘a forceable consideration of the incomprehencable power and infinite majestie of Almighty God’, which ‘caused in me a sincere love to Him for His goodnesse to me’.¹² John Livingstone’s less vivid recollections of ‘when I was but very young’ capture a different truth. He could not remember precisely when ‘the Lord at first wrought upon my heart’, merely that ‘I would sometimes pray with some feeling, and read the word with delight, but thereafter would very often intermitt any such exercises ... and again begin and again intermitt.’ The seven-year-old Thomas Goodwin was similarly changeable, to his own later disapproval.¹³

This changeability is one important reason why Protestant life-narrators found it so difficult to take childhood religion seriously. Their understanding of true conversion, ‘effectual calling’, was as a singular, pivotal moment in the Christian’s life. A surge of piety which was not maintained was thereby discredited as a false dawn: at best a token of true faith to come, at worst a diabolical lure to trick children into imagining that their passing feelings and vain imaginings were true and saving faith. With an understanding of conversion in which understanding of and intellectual assent to a certain set of core doctrines, it was hard to see how childhood conversions could be possible. Martin Luther had once cited the case of the unborn John the Baptist leaping in his mother’s womb when he heard the Virgin Mary’s voice to argue that infants could have true and saving faith even before birth.¹⁴ But that was not how Protestant establishments came to think of children.

Our sources do not let us glimpse faith quite that early, but we certainly have accounts that, to modern eyes, look profound enough. Richard Willis gave a heartwarming cameo of how, while he was at his desk one morning, ‘my little grand child came into the roome where I was, falling downe upon her knees, and desired me to pray to God to blesse her’. He did so in silence, and she, trusting that it was done, went forth happily, ‘assureing her selfe of the blessing shee desired’.¹⁵ Such tenderness is perhaps a grandparent’s prerogative. A woman known to us as I.B. had a sharper-edged experience. Her six-year-old son refused to play with the foul-mouthed neighbouring children. She tried to persuade him that he ought simply to forgive them, but he replied solemnly, ‘Mother, with great repentance God can forgive, for his mercies are great; but good Mother, let us forbear that which is evill.’ The implicit reprimand brought her to renewed repentance herself.¹⁶

Older children, aged around ten to fourteen, might achieve a more mature piety. Nehemiah Wallington was ten ‘the first time that ever I prayed in privat myselfe’. Thomas Shepard was the same age when his father fell ill and ‘I did pray very strongly and heartily’ (and vainly) for his life. Alice Wandesford spent her twelfth birthday meditating on the story of Christ in the temple when he was the same age, and measuring herself against him:

¹¹ Thomas M’Crie (ed.), *The Life of Mr Robert Blair, Minister of St. Andrews* (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1848), 4-5.

¹² Charles Jackson (ed.), *The Autobiography of Mrs Alice Thornton, of East Newton, Co. York* (Durham: Surtees Society 62, 1873), 6-7.

¹³ W. K. Tweedie (ed.), *Select Biographies Edited for the Wodrow Society*, vol. I (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1845), 132; Goodwin, *Works*, II.lvii-lviii.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1958), 242.

¹⁵ R. Willis, *Mount Tabor. Or Private Exercises of a Penitent Sinner* (RSTC 25752. London: R. B[adger] for P. Stephen and C. Meredith, 1639), 211.

¹⁶ Vavasor Powell, *Spirituell Experiences, Of sundry Beleevers* (Wing P3095. London: Robert Ibbitson, 1653), 53.

‘although I daily read the word of God, yet [I] was of a weake capacity to know the way to salvation’. At twelve even John Winthrop ‘began to have some more savour of Religion’.¹⁷ Stephen Crisp recalled that before the age of twelve, in the year immediately preceding England’s Civil War:

Now I began to perceive my own Insufficiency, and my want of Gods Power, and that it was not in my own power to keep my self out of Sin, and the Wages of it was Death, so that I was in a great streight. ... I became a diligent Seeker, and Prayer, and Mourner, and would often find out most secret Fields and unusual Places, there to pour out my Complaints to the Lord.¹⁸

Crisp would later become a Quaker (as his use of the term ‘Seeker’ here indicates), and this is one of many Quaker autobiographical accounts which include a conventional but fairly intense Puritan childhood. These accounts are naturally to be treated with some care, since their authors are keen to emphasise the fruitlessness and deceptiveness of this sort of piety. But once we have stripped out the editorial comment, the substance of the accounts is perfectly plausible. And it may be that it is precisely those who had come to distance themselves from conventional Protestant piety who are most likely to give us a clear view of it in their younger selves.

Godliness and good learning

One reason why the years before and on the cusp of puberty stand out in so many accounts is that, for boys of a certain social class, it marked a distinct life-stage: grammar school. This, for William Cowper and for a good many others, was when God began ‘to acquaint my heart to seek him: ... he put this prayer in my heart euey day in the way, Lord, bow mine eare, that I may heare thy Word’.¹⁹ It was no coincidence. Early modern Protestantism was a heartfelt religion, but also an unapologetically cerebral one. Pious children were marked by their zeal for learning, and learning was one of the main routes by which children were introduced to piety.

Indeed, in many accounts of children’s religion, studiousness and holiness are collapsed into one another. This was the case from the first beginnings of literacy. Virtually all of the ABCs and other early aids to reading available in print in this period doubled as catechetical texts, as the dual meaning of the word ‘primer’ indicates. Protestant children at many points of the social ladder, both boys and girls, were raised in regular Bible-reading as a discipline. ‘About the fyft yeir of my age,’ the Scots Presbyterian leader James Melville recalled, ‘the Grate Buik was put in my hand.’ When it became clear he was struggling to learn from it under his widowed father’s instruction, he was sent away to school aged seven: ‘a happie and golden tyme’, at least in recollection and in comparison.²⁰ Other families managed better. Richard Willis’ fond recollection of overhearing when ‘my little grandchilde was set by her Grandmother to reade her mornings Chapter’ gives us a glimpse of the pious

¹⁷ David Booy (ed.), *The Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618-1654: A Selection* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 267; Michael McGiffert (ed.), *God’s Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety, Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 39; Jackson (ed.), *Autobiography of Alice Thornton*, 13; Winthrop, *Papers*, 155.

¹⁸ Stephen Crisp, *A memorable account of the Christian experiences, Gospel labours, travels, and sufferings of that ancient servant of Christ, Stephen Crisp* (Wing C6921. London: T. Sowle, 1694), 7.

¹⁹ William Cowper, *The Life and Death of the Reverend Father and faithfull Seruant of God, Mr. William Cowper, Bishop of Galloway* (RSTC 5945. London: George Purslowe for John Budge, 1619), sig. A3v.

²⁰ Robert Pitcairn (ed.), *The Autobiography and Diary of Mr James Melvill* (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842), 16-17.

routines both of the little girl and of the older woman. Grace Mildmay gratefully remembered her mother teaching her prayers and setting her to daily Bible-reading, and advised her daughter that all children should be exposed constantly and diligently to Scripture, ‘vntill they be brought to the perfection of knowledge, faith & holynes.’ A woman whom we know as M. K. was singled out from her eleven siblings when she was seven, as the most fit for learning, and set to work on the Bible and Erasmus’ Gospel paraphrases. ‘About this time’, she remembered, she took up a serious discipline of self-examination, such that ‘whatsoever I was about, still my heart was praying’.²¹

Ezekiel Culverwell recommended that children of ten or older should be set daily, not only to read, but to memorise and to recite a chapter of the Bible. In some schools Biblical memorisation was a regular discipline.²² The Ishams of Northamptonshire raised their children in that practice, and although the young Elizabeth found it hard (the New Testament Epistles were apparently particularly tricky) she persisted with it into adulthood. The young Herbert Palmer, by contrast, ‘took much pleasure in learning Chapters by heart’ (perhaps to be expected of a future Cambridge head of house). He proceeded to teach others by the same technique. Whether or not the subjects enjoyed it, such mental hammering could leave a permanent impression. Richard Norwood and Archibald Johnston of Wariston both had vivid memories of reading particular Biblical passages as children.²³ And if learning Scriptures by the quire was a little rarefied, learning to recite prayers and catechisms was absolutely routine.

Memorisation was an intellectual and spiritual discipline, but also a reflection of a practical reality. Books were precious objects, expensive and not always readily to hand. Another sign of this is that, when children were given Bibles or other religious works, they could recognise them as treasures. One of the very few events which Nehemiah Wallington recorded from his childhood was being given a Bible, which he took as a singular proof of his father’s love. Elizabeth Isham, too, remembered that she, her brother and her sister were given Bibles by their father, ‘in which I much delighted counting it my cheifest treasure’. Even when she found a loose page from a Bible, she ‘folded it up and made mee a little booke of it and being very ioyent of it I kept it in my poket reading it often to my selfe’. She was also agog to read her great-grandfather’s copy of Henry Bull’s *Christian praiers and holy meditations*, which he had ‘marked in many places that he liked’. She cherished the book into adulthood: ‘it doth much rejoyce mee ... to tred in the selfe same stepes towards heaven wherein my forefathers have walked.’²⁴ Christian piety and filial piety could be powerfully mutual reinforcements.

Little churches and big churches

²¹ Willis, *Mount Tabor*, 199; Linda Pollock, *With Faith and Physic: The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman, Lady Grace Mildmay 1552-1620* (London: Collins & Brown, 1993), 29; Central Library, Northampton, Northamptonshire Studies Collection: Lady Grace Mildmay’s Meditations, fo. 16r; Powell, *Spiritual Experiences*, 161-3.

²² Ezekiel Culverwell, *A ready way to remember the Scriptures* (RSTC 6111. London: John Clark, 1637), sig. A2v; Walter Frere and William Kennedy, *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the period of the Reformation* (Alcuin Club Collections 14-16, London 1910), III.138.

²³ Princeton University Library, MS RTC01 no. 62 (Elizabeth Isham’s ‘Book of Remembrance’: hereinafter ‘Isham, ‘Rememberance’), fos 12r, 14v; Samuel Clarke, *The lives of thirty-two English divines, famous in their generations for learning and piety* (Wing C4539. London: for William Birch, 1677), 184, 190; George Morison Paul (ed.), *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston, 1632-1639* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1911) 45-6; Wesley Frank Craven and Walter B. Hayward (eds), *The Journal of Richard Norwood, Surveyor of Bermuda* (New York: Bermuda Historical Monuments Trust, 1945), 8.

²⁴ Booy (ed.), *Notebooks of Wallington*, 267; Isham, ‘Rememberance’, fos 13v, 14r, 16v.

It was, indeed, a Protestant commonplace that the home was a little church and the head of the household its minister. Children, and servants who were themselves often children as the modern world counts these things, were perhaps the most important part of such a church's congregation. In the ideal Protestant household, there was a rhythm of twice-daily family prayers: these might consist of set or extempore prayers led by the father, the mother or a senior servant, readings from Scripture, and perhaps the singing of a Psalm or two. The role of children in these events was strictly limited. They were to kneel upright, usually on a pad or cushion; raise their hands and eyes to heaven, but otherwise remain still; listen; say 'Amen'; and sing. For many children those requirements would be a formidable challenge, and parents will certainly have found themselves negotiating the best settlement that could be reached. This may be one reason why twice-daily family prayers were more aspired to than achieved. It was also one reason for the common recommendation that, no matter how piously enthusiastic the *paterfamilias* might be, family prayers should be kept to a brisk quarter of an hour. The nonconformist minister Paul Baynes made this his rule, 'having Respect to the Weakness, and Infirmities of his Servants and Children'.²⁵ For those, such as infants, who could not be expected to kneel unmoving and silent even for fifteen minutes, the obvious alternative was to excuse them from 'family-duty' altogether, which naturally also meant that an adult or an older child would need to be absent too, or would at least need to keep a sharp ear out for trouble. It remains unclear – at least to me – at quite what age or stage youngsters were expected to leave behind childish things and join the family on their knees in the parlour.²⁶

If children's role in family prayers remained peripheral, however, they took a starring role in perhaps the most widely observed conventional piety of all: saying grace at table. Since late medieval times, if not earlier, these brief prayers of thanksgiving and blessing before or after meals had been conventionally spoken by children. John Bruen, whose memory of his own childish piety we have already met, disapproved of his neighbours' habit of procuring 'a simple and silly childe to say grace', but he was swimming against the tide. The very earliest English Protestant primer provided a text for a table-grace 'to be sayd of chyldrene'. The Huntingdonshire children who supposedly suffered at the hands of the 'witches of Warboys' were afflicted with seizures 'as soon as they did offer to say grace either before or after dinner'. One of the very first elements of a Christian education for children was, Robert Cleaver taught, 'to teach them to praise god before and after meales.' The graces in Thomas Sorocold's prayer-book were intended for use 'by Children and others'. The title-page of the expanded edition of William Crashaw's catechism advertises 'houshold Prayers for Families, and Graces for Children'.²⁷ If children had a role in family piety, this was it: hesitantly or proudly to read or recite a short form of words (sometimes a verse, which would be easier to remember) before and after a meal. It was a training both in piety and in table-manners. What it meant for the adults present is another matter. Presumably pride in, affection for, embarrassment about or discipline of children often

²⁵ Clarke, *Lives of thirty-two divines*, 24.

²⁶ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 365-74.

²⁷ Hinde, *Faithfull Remonstrance ... of Iohn Bruen*, 52; George Joye (ed. and trans.), *Ortulus anime. The garden of the soule* (RSTC 13828.4. Argentine: F. Foxe [i.e. Antwerp: M. de Keyser], 1530), sig. H2v; Philip C. Almond (ed.), *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 97; Robert Cleaver[?], *A [G]odly [sic] form of householde gouernement: for the ordering of priuate families* (RSTC 5382. London: Thomas Creede, for Thomas Man, 1598), 264; Thomas Sorocold, *Supplications of Saints. A Booke of Prayers and Prayses ... A sixth Edition enlarged* (RSTC 22933. London: T. S[nodham] for Nicholas Bourne, 1616), 398; William Crashaw, *Milke for Babes. Or, A North-Country Catechisme. Made plaine and easie, to the Capacitie of the simplest. With houshold Prayers for Families, and Graces for Children. The fourth Impression* (RSTC 6021. London: Nicholas Okes, 1622).

swamped prayerfulness. And it would also be natural to associate saying grace with childishness. Graces must be used, John Davidson warned, ‘not onely by children, but also by the best and most able in the house’.²⁸ The many adults who (as preachers worried) neglected to say grace may simply have felt that they had outgrown it.

Published graces usually came in pairs – for use before and after a meal – although it seems that the second type were more often neglected. In some households, however, the children’s role in mealtime piety was not done when the diners said *Amen* and took their seats. Some of the godly domesticated a schoolroom practice which had itself been borrowed from the monastery: instead of idle dinner-table chatter, the family would be edified by hearing a chapter of Scripture read while they ate in silence. The earnest early seventeenth-century Scot Archibald Johnston of Wariston referred to Scripture being read ‘at’ or ‘befor’ both dinner and supper as if it were routine.²⁹ The readers might be servants, as in one stylised account of an Elizabethan household. But this, too, could be a role for children or youths. In the 1630s, the nonconformist minister Herbert Palmer acted as tutor to a group gentlemen’s sons who boarded with him; he had them read a chapter aloud each mealtime. If children had been memorising passages of Scripture, mealtimes were the perfect time to test their accomplishments.

These patterns assume that godliness was passed down the generations, from pious parents to potentially wayward children, but that ideal vision of a stable Protestant society was more dreamed of than accomplished. In an age of dislocating religious change and of rapidly rising literacy, it was often youths who taught the Gospel to their elders, not the reverse. This appealed to Protestantism’s love for paradox and inversion, but it was also a reality. One divine suggested, pragmatically, that illiterate adult believers should teach their children to read so that they might read the Scriptures to them. We may doubt whether this was widespread, but it was how a well-known Protestant martyr of 1550s Wales, Rawlins White, had come to his faith.³⁰ And literate children could be a communal as well as a family resource. As a schoolboy, Jeremy Whitaker read his sermon notes aloud to his Yorkshire neighbours. In June 1611, a huge storm terrified the young Simonds D’Ewes, his schoolmates and their neighbours. Some feared that the Day of Judgement had come, and as a result ‘there came divers poor people to the school to desire some of the scholars to go with them to their houses, and to read prayers there’.³¹ Just occasionally, a pious, literate eight-year-old is exactly what you need.

That was as far as Protestant children’s public religious role went, however. Early modern English Protestant worship featured no Sunday schools, no specialist family worship and indeed no specialised provision for youngsters at all that we can reconstruct. Those who were brought to public worship – and not all were, especially the youngest – had to enjoy or endure it as best they could. The Yorkshire schoolboy who allegedly ‘did daunce in tyme of devyne Service in the churche and did plaie at coverpin’ was perhaps unusually bold, but others will have sat in silence longing to do the same.³² The sermon, supposedly the central

²⁸ John Davidson, *Some helpes for young Schollers in Christianity* (RSTC 6324.5. Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1602), sig. F2r.

²⁹ Paul (ed.), *Diary of Johnston of Wariston*, 166.

³⁰ Nicholas Bownde, *The Doctrine of the Sabbath, Plainely layde forth, and soundly proued* (RSTC 3436. London: Widow Orwin, for Iohn Porter & Thomas Man, 1595), 202; John Foxe, *The ecclesiasticall history contaynyng the Actes and monuments* (RSTC 11223. London: John Day, 1570), 1726.

³¹ Samuel Clarke, *A Collection of the Lives of Ten Eminent Divines* (Wing C4506. London: for William Miller, 1662), 160; James Orchard Halliwell (ed.), *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D’Ewes, Bart.* (London: Richard Bentley, 1845), I.39.

³² David George (ed.), *Lancashire: Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1991), 14.

hour (at least) in Protestant worship, could be trying for adults, and doubly so for children. One satirist claimed that adults deliberately brought their children to church with them so that they themselves would have a distraction during an interminable sermon.³³ Even pious young people struggled to make much of preaching. Richard Norwood, aged twelve, was occasionally moved by sermons but only in a ‘very confused and uncertain manner’; Elizabeth Isham, at the same age, was troubled as to ‘why I profited no more by others at Church’, and concluded that ‘I delighted not so much in it because I understood it not.’ She later claimed that ‘the first time that I apprehended ... or gave heede to a sermon’ was when she was twenty.³⁴ An early seventeenth-century guide to godly household management lamented how little children and servants typically understood of sermons. If they are asked afterwards what the preacher had said, this author claimed, they

can neither shew the summe and diuision of the Text, nor what doctrines were drawne from it, much lesse how they were confi[r]med and in the vse applied, but onely they bring certaine words, and sentences, or similitudes, not vnderstanding the purpose whereto any thing was spoken by the preacher.³⁵

Our author was shocked: but we can hardly be surprised.

He recommended a stricter process of post-sermon examination, but that only added to a regular practice in both church and home: catechesis, a practice whose centrality to the early modern Protestant project it would be hard to exaggerate. The centrality of the practice to Protestant publishing, to ministerial ambitions and to family life has been emphasised by some important recent scholarship.³⁶ It was also an important part of children’s participation in public worship. Richard Kilby, the Derbyshire minister who was unforgiving about his own childhood, had a more robust pastoral realism about his young flock. ‘It is not good to hold children too hard, or too long at their books,’ he warned, ‘for their wits are tender, and therefore ought to be gently used, and often refreshed.’ He even told youngsters, ‘when you are allowed to play, then play, for it is healthfull to stir your bodies’ – at least in ‘honest sports’.³⁷ It was in this spirit that he approached the task of catechesis. Many ministers held catechism class on a Sunday afternoon, the after-dinner graveyard shift, but Kilby preferred to build it into the evening service. His practice, as he wrote, was that

After the second lesson, I asked a youth ... three or foure questions touching the foundation of Religion. Then I made those short answers plain, and proved them out of the Bible in halfe an houres space.³⁸

For some youngsters, no doubt, that small degree of audience participation was welcome. For others, public cross-examination may not have been the highlight of the week.

Catechesis was, amongst other things, a rite of passage, since it was one of the hurdles to be cleared en route to that mark of Protestant adulthood: participation in the Lord’s Supper. Quite how old children were at their admission to the communion table remains unclear, with widely varying estimates given in the scholarship. A careful study of eighteenth-century

³³ John Phillips, *A Satyr against Hypocrites* (Wing P2101. London: for N.B., 1655), 8.

³⁴ Craven, *Journal of Richard Norwood*, 9-10; Isham, ‘Remembrance’, fo. 15r; www.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/Isham/index_yr.htm s.v. 1628.

³⁵ ‘R. R.’, *The House-holders Helpe, for Domesticall Discipline* (RSTC 20586. London: George Purslowe for John Budge, 1615), 24-5.

³⁶ Ian Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, c. 1530-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); McQuade, *Catechisms and Women’s Writing*.

³⁷ Richard Kilby, *The Burthen of a Loaden Conscience* (RSTC 14594.3. London: R. Y. for J. Boler, 1635), 105-6.

³⁸ Kilby, *Hallelujah*, 100, 123.

England concluded that sixteen was by then the commonest age of first communion, but admitted that ‘concrete evidence is hard to find’.³⁹ Arthur Wodenoth was fourteen when he came to London and took his first communion, as was Thomas Goodwin when he went up to Cambridge and took his. But fourteen was a common age for leaving home, and that, rather than numerical age, may have been the decisive factor in their cases. Elizabeth Isham and her younger brother and sister all received their first communion together, when she was seventeen; her siblings’ exact ages are not known. But again the prompt seems to have been a change of life rather than the calendar: their mother had recently died. The poet and pastoral advice-writer George Herbert opposed an age-based rule for admission to communion, worrying that ‘children and youths are usually deferred too long, under pretence of devotion to the Sacrament’.⁴⁰ It may be that in England, where ministers were not usually permitted to impose rigorous doctrinal tests on their people, some used age as a proxy for godly knowledge. It certainly appears that in Scotland, where ministers faced no such restraints, the young and zealous were able to take their first communions rather earlier. Robert Blair was admitted at age eleven; James Melville and the newly married Jean Stewart at thirteen.⁴¹ They may have been children still in our eyes: but in their church’s and their own, no longer.

Stirrings of faith

Admission to communion was supposed to reflect more than successful memorisation of prayers or a catechism: it was in principle a mark of inner regeneration. The inward piety of early modern Protestant children is, however, both the most important and the most unreachable of subjects. All we have are some recurrent themes, and a handful of cases where we have evidence which is more deeply textured, but no more reliable or representative.

Unsurprisingly, given how consistently children were told that ‘a corrupt nature is a rugged knotty piece to hew’, the most recurrent of those themes is repentance.⁴² In most cases – although, as we shall see, not all – a pious childhood was described as a counter-cultural one of peternatural mourning for sin, making the little exemplar in question stand out from his or her contemporaries. John Crook, growing up in the north of England in the 1620s, recalled how before the age of ten, ‘I ... often prayed in by-Corners, as Words sprang in my Mind, and as I learned Prayers without Book.’ But the fruit of these prayers was to be vividly conscious of his struggles with sin.

I often mourned and went heavily, not taking that delight in Play and Pastime which I saw other Children took; which made me often conclude in my Mind, that they were in a better Condition than I, and that surely God was angry with me.⁴³

Adult Protestants who noticed that children were divided into a raucous majority and a pale and quiet minority drew the opposite conclusion: it was the godly remnant who were set

³⁹ Susan J. Wright, ‘Confirmation, catechism and communion: the role of the young in the post-Reformation Church’ in her *Parish, Church and People: Local Studies in Lay Religion 1350-1750* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), 216-17. Cf. Paula McQuade’s estimate that first communion at the age of seven or eight was typical: *Catechisms and Women’s Writing*, 31.

⁴⁰ Arthur Wodenoth, ‘1645, Expressions of Mr. Arthur Wodenoth’, in Harold Spencer Scott (ed.), ‘The Journal of Sir Roger Wilbraham’, in *The Camden Miscellany X* (London: Camden Society, s.3 vol. 4, 1902), 120; Goodwin, *Works*, II.iii; Isham, ‘Remembrance’, fo. 20r; George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 258.

⁴¹ M’Crie (ed.), *Life of Mr Robert Blair*, 6-7; Pitcairn (ed.), *Autobiography of Mr James Melvill*, 23; Paul (ed.), *Diary of Johnston of Wariston*, 4-6.

⁴² James Janeway, *A Token for Children: Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths, of several young Children* (Wing J478. London: Dorman Newman, 1676), sig. A3v.

⁴³ John Crook, *A short history of the life of John Crook* (ESTC T73591. London: T. Sowle, 1706), 4, 6.

apart. If, in general, such children anticipated or imitated the inner mourning for sin to which so many adult Protestants aspired, in one crucial regard they had an advantage over the grown-ups – or at least, over grown-up men. Weeping was widely regarded as a mark of godliness, and believers who found themselves unable to weep for their sins were often troubled by the fact.⁴⁴ But in early modern British masculine culture, shedding tears was regarded as feminine and as childish, and pious men struggled to wring tears from themselves. Boys had no such difficulty (nor, of course, did girls). Johnston of Wariston recalled that as a child there were certain Biblical passages which he ‘could not weal read ... without som tears of bairnly compassion’. The young Thomas Goodwin found that ‘from the time I was six years old ... I could weep for my sins whenever I did set myself to think of them’. Nehemiah Wallington recalled that, when he first prayed in private at the age of ten, ‘I powred out my soule to God with teeres my heart was enlarged and I was so Ellevated that I thought I did see the heavens opened’.⁴⁵

The occasion for Wallington’s prayer was one of the most regular spurs to early piety: a crisis of health in the family. The ubiquity of infant and child mortality, the prevalence of maternal mortality, the unpredictability of death at all ages and for all classes: these were some of the dominant facts of early modern children’s lives, and they affected their religion as they affected everything else. The rationale behind one of the first English Protestant devotional works written specifically for children, James Janeway’s *A Token for Children*, was to prepare them for the very real possibility that they might not live to see adulthood. Addressing his young readers directly, Janeway asked:

Did you never hear of a little Child that died? ... How do you know but that you may be the next Child that may die? and where are you then, if you be not God’s Child? ... Get by thy self, into the Chamber or Garret, and fall upon thy knees, and weep and mourn.⁴⁶

The bulk of his book, and of a second volume which he quickly produced, consisted of the life-stories of children of exemplary piety, all of whom had died in childhood. Most had been godly before they fell ill, a point he was keen to emphasise to those who might wish to save repentance until they needed it. But in some cases it was a death or illness in the family which had first stirred them from sin. We read of one boy converted at the age of four, on the occasion of

the death of a little Brother; when he saw him without breath, and not able to speak or stir, and then carried out of doors, and put into a pit-hole, he was greatly concerned, and asked notable questions about him, but that which was most affecting of himself and others, was whether he must die too. ... From that time forward he was exceeding serious.⁴⁷

Highly stylised as these accounts are, that at least is a credible response.

But if we can believe that early modern children felt the urgency of their need for divine aid in the face of the world’s dangers, it does not seem that they always responded to that need in the impeccably orthodox manner that Janeway recommended. If children begged God for mercy for themselves and their families, some of them also tried to bargain with him.

⁴⁴ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 187-195.

⁴⁵ Paul (ed.), *Diary of Johnston of Wariston*, 45-6; Booy (ed.), *Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington*, 266-7; Goodwin, *Works*, II.iii; cf. Almond (ed.), *Demonic Possession*, 179.

⁴⁶ Janeway, *A Token*, sigs A8v, A10v.

⁴⁷ James Janeway, *A Token for Children. The Second Part* (Wing J480aA. London: Dorman Newman, 1673), 2-3.

The making of pious vows as a response to illness and other crises was a recurrent and problematic theme of Protestant piety, and it was strongly associated with childhood. When Thomas Shepard was ten years old, his father fell dangerously ill. He not only prayed ‘very strongly and heartily’ for his father to live, but also ‘made some covenant, if God would do it, to serve him the better’. The bargain failed, and his father died. Looking back as an adult, he took it as a bitter lesson to make no such vain vows. Likewise, Richard Norwood, aged twelve, also ‘sometimes made vows to God which I was careful to observe’, but which ‘proceeded of a very wavering heart without any true faith that I can discern’, and were aimed at securing some worldly benefit or other.⁴⁸ Two Scottish examples show a more ambiguous face. Aged about six, Robert Blair was profoundly affected by a visiting preacher’s sermon, and vowed that if he became a preacher himself, he would preach his first sermon on the same text; a vow whose eventual fulfilment he recorded with satisfaction. And in 1571, the fourteen-year-old James Melville made a ‘promise and vow’ to pursue a ministerial vocation; clearly a solemn event for him, as he claimed that his vow determined his decisions at key moments over the next five years.⁴⁹ Richard Capel claimed that ‘Satan doth push on every boy and girle on any occasion, to runne into a corner and there to make vowes’.⁵⁰ But it was easier to denounce the practice than to eradicate it.

Three Protestant children

Generalities are all very well. But each pious child is pious in his or her own way, and the variety as well as the commonality of the Protestant childhood experience need to be seen. We will finish with three unusual cases where later autobiographical reflections give us a different and more fine-grained view of the religious lives of particular children. Not that we should necessarily believe everything, or anything, of what these authors tell us about their childhoods: but, at least, that we can see what they as adult believers understood childhood religion could be.

Richard Norwood’s remarkable autobiographical reflections are not indulgent to his youthful failings, but nor are they dismissive of his ‘childish piety’.⁵¹ In his early youth, before the age of ten or twelve, he tells us, ‘the Lord was pleased by means of my parents, school-dame, school-masters and sermons, to plant in my heart some seeds of religion and the fear of God’. Those seeds did not yet bear fruit, and yet he was keen to recall them, in part because they did keep him from gross sin for some years thereafter. He described these childish impulses to piety as ‘praeludia, offers or essays of the Holy Spirit of God, as it is said our Savior took little children in his arms and blessed them’.⁵²

As to what this ‘childish piety’ comprised: it was more than just making vows. ‘When I was a child going in long coats to school’, he learned to sing the psalms ‘with great facility and delight’, and was ‘much affected’ by them, especially the psalms of praise. Aged seven or eight, he was assiduous in reading Scripture, was ‘taken with great admiration of some places’, and was ‘frequent in private prayer’. Yet he also remembered ‘at several times reasoning ... about whether there were a God’. Adults assured him that God loved him, but he was not sure ‘how they could know it was so’. And when he tried to share his enthusiasm for

⁴⁸ McGiffert (ed.), *God’s Plot*, 39; Craven, *Journal of Richard Norwood*, 10.

⁴⁹ M’Crie (ed.), *Life of Mr Robert Blair*, 5; Pitcairn (ed.), *Autobiography of Mr James Melville*, 24, 37, 55.

⁵⁰ Richard Capel, *Tentations: their nature, danger, cure* (RSTC 4595. London: R. B[adger], 1633), 290.

⁵¹ Norwood’s childhood religion is discussed, from a different perspective and with perhaps excessive psychohistorical confidence, in John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 110-16.

⁵² Craven, *Journal of Richard Norwood*, 5-6.

Scripture with his parents, ‘they made me little answer (so far as I remember) but seemed rather to smile at my childishness’. This made him wonder whether what the preachers taught was really true,

or whether elder people did not know them to be otherwise, only they were willing that we children should be so persuaded of them, that we might follow our books the better and be kept in from play.⁵³

Norwood had an enviable ability to recall the lived experience of childhood, or at least to imagine it convincingly: but he had some help from an unexpected quarter. For he is one of the first English Protestant autobiographers to have read Augustine’s *Confessions*, on which he self-consciously modelled his account, and which plainly prompted him to do what few of his contemporaries had done: to look *before* his conversion for signs of the early promptings and leadings of the Holy Spirit in his life.

Our second child was also, as an adult, ‘imboldden by the sight of S Austi[n’s] con[cessions]’ to write her life in the same mode. Elizabeth Isham’s story is worth reading in its entirety, and she has attracted considerable scholarly interest.⁵⁴ She attributed her religious formation chiefly to her mother and her grandmother: ‘even when I begun to speake they taught me to pray’. In early childhood, she ‘aprehended thee to be Glorious in thy selfe that thou wert God’ and ‘thought thee to have a celestiaall being from all eternity and ... knew that thou wast of all power that thou knewest our thoughts’. When she was about eight years old, however, ‘I came to a fuller knowledge of thee’, a change she ascribed to education but also to her parents’ discipline. Her first earnest prayers were ‘to avoyde my mothers displeasure’, a problem which made a matter as trivial as a lost needle seem desperate. When the needle was found ‘I rejoysed much at it supossing it to be thy doeing’. God was her protector against her mother’s wrath. ‘In these dayes feareing my parents I had no other refuge but to flie unto thee.’ The fear was not idle. In her fury, Judith Isham used to have a servant hold her daughter down, the better to beat her. For a time at least, Elizabeth seems to have feared God in the same way. If she saw a red sun or moon, ‘I feared that the day of Christ was at hand.’ She interpreted any mishap as a judgement, and set herself to frequently repeating her prayers, Commandments, Creed and catechism. The catechetical training was her father’s contribution. He trained his children to memorise it, and was much ‘offended with me’ that she could remember ballads better than the set text. She worked each night for the dread moment on a Sunday when the recitation would be demanded of her, and adds that ‘I more feared my father then my mother.’⁵⁵

Looking back on this phase, she was tempted to dismiss those memorised prayers as worthless, ‘talking like a parrit rather of custom then devotion’. But

upon consideration I thinke better of this early serving of thee my God; perceving the inclination of Children to be apt to learne that which is not so good and to rejoyce in it; therefore now I thinke it better by way of prevension to season them in the best.

And indeed, as her religion blossomed in her ninth and tenth years, there quickly came to be much more to it than fear. Her grandmother showed her another way. She gave the children psalters and taught them to sing, in which Elizabeth ‘much delighted ... thinking I did well’.

⁵³ Craven, *Journal of Richard Norwood*, 5-10.

⁵⁴ Isham, ‘Rememberance’, fo. 33v. Cf. the complete but not error-free transcript at www.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/Isham/index_bor.htm. The manuscript’s religious politics in the setting of late 1630s Northamptonshire are discussed in Peter Lake and Isaac Stephens, *Scandal and Religious Identity in Early Stuart England: A Northamptonshire Maid’s Tragedy* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015).

⁵⁵ Isham, ‘Rememberance’, fos 3r-4r, 7r, 9v, 10r-v.

Their mother, however, put a stop to that, on the grounds that the children could not sing sufficiently reverently: even as an adult Elizabeth still felt the sting of that denial. A happier memory was her visits to the old lady during an illness, when she herself was eight or nine. Struck by the delight her grandmother took in her devotional books, Elizabeth took to reading and copying from them.⁵⁶

For her, as for so many other children before and since, books were her liberation. Aged ten, she 'delighted' in reading the Sermon on the Mount, and thereafter her Biblical and devotional reading only accelerated. Her prayers began to have less worldly themes, asking for 'faith and grace' and 'striving to weepe'. And whether because of her increasing earnestness, or simply because of increasing age, the conflicts with her parents gradually receded. When she was sixteen, she and her siblings abandoned the recitations of the catechism, against their father's wishes - although she added that she continued to repeat it to herself daily. Her mother died the following year, but not before making peace with her daughter. Again, a book had been crucial: the exposition of the Ten Commandments written by John Dod, who was a family friend and a spiritual counsellor to the older woman. She took to heart Dod's warning that children should be disciplined in love rather than in anger. Her new technique, when she saw Elizabeth misbehave, was not to fly into a rage but to 'holde her fan afore her face', praying for patience and judgement. This gave Elizabeth time to reflect on her error, so that as soon as the fan was lowered she would go and ask forgiveness, and would be set a penitential task, 'which I performed with the more dilligence she having delt so well with mee'. Our sources rarely let us come so close to a happy ending.⁵⁷

We meet our third and final Protestant child through a much slipperier and less circumstantial text: but it contains such vividness and is so sharply different from almost all that we have seen so far that it is compelling nevertheless. Thomas Traherne built a good part of his theology around his idealised recollections, or reimaginations, of his own infant spiritual experience. For most of his contemporaries, infancy was a sink of depravity and ignorance. But Traherne, born in 1636 or 1637, reckoned that before a fall into sin and near-atheism during his childhood, he enjoyed an almost prelapsarian infancy:

When I was a child ... my Knowledg was Divine. I knew by Intuition those things which since my Apostasie, I Collected again, by the Highest Reason. ... I seemed as one Brought into the Estate of Innocence. ... I saw all in the Peace of Eden; Heaven and Earth did sing my Creators Praises and could not make more Melody to Adam, then to me. ... Is it not Strange, that an Infant should be Heir of the World, and see those Mysteries which the Books of the Learned never unfold?

He was clear that this period of innocence was very early indeed: before 'I began to speak and goe', that is, walk or crawl. It is hard not to read this with some scepticism. Actual memories from such an early age are unusual, and it is clear that, to put it at its mildest, Traherne was marshalling these meditations in order to make a theological point. He argued that Christ's admonition to us to be like children was 'Deeper far then is generally believed', and that human sin derived much less from 'any inward corruption or Deprivation of Nature' than from 'the outward Bondage of Opinion and Custom. ... It is not our Parents Loyns, so

⁵⁶ Isham, 'Rememberance', fos 5r, 6v-7r

⁵⁷ Isham, 'Rememberance', fo. 10v; www.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/Isham/index_yr.htm s.v. 1618, 1619, 1620, 1624.

much as our Parents lives, that Enthrals and Binds us'. So perhaps we may dismiss these 'recollections' as a pious fiction.⁵⁸

Or perhaps not. Some children are late talkers or walkers: another idiosyncratic Protestant child whose religion would become highly irregular, Edward Herbert of Cherbury, did not talk until he was seven, the result of an ear infection. Herbert's memory of his first words – in which he suddenly asked how he came into the world, much to the amusement of his nurse – will have been tidied up by recycling through family folklore, but we do not have to doubt the basic story.⁵⁹ In Traherne's case, his episodic recollections have enough of the awkward contours of truth about them that we may reasonably deduce a bedrock of real events lies beneath the rich theological soil. It is not simply those early flashes of innocent idealism, in which the gates of his house were 'at first the End of the World', and the first time he saw 'Boys and Girles Tumbling in the Street, and Playing', he saw them as 'moving Jewels'. There is also a heartfelt bitterness about how his childish innocence was broken by 'the Evil Influence of a Bad Education', so that in comparison to his former wide-eyed wondering at the riches of the created order, he was become 'like a Prodigal Son feeding upon Husks with Swine'. He does not dwell on either his parents or his schoolmates in these meditations, but neither is it wholly clear that he has forgiven them.⁶⁰

More compelling, however, are moments of vivid recollection from a little later in his childhood. For example:

Once I remember (I think I was about 4 yeer old, when) I thus reasoned with my self. sitting in a little Obscure Room in my Fathers poor House. If there be a God, certainly He must be infinit in Goodness. ... And if He be infinit in Goodness, and a Perfect Being in Wisdom and Love, certainly He must do most Glorious Things: and giv us infinit Riches; how comes it to pass therfore that I am so poor?

What is unusual is not that a four-year-old should think such a thing, but that an adult should be able to reach back into his past to reconstruct it. Likewise Traherne's childhood imaginings of what the Bible might be: he was disappointed and inclined to disbelieve it when he at length discovered, anticlimactically, that it was an object of board, rag and ink like any other book, and was not borne to him by angels directly from heaven. As an adult he found this hope and disappointment rich grounds for meditation, which does not mean that the story was invented.⁶¹

The most persistent theme of these memories, however, remained what it had been from infancy: the wonder of the created order itself, whose secrets the boy Traherne set himself to unravel. 'Som times I Wondered Why Men were made no Bigger? I would have had a Man as Big as a Giant, a Giant as big as a Castle, and a Castle as big as the Heavens.' Most vividly, he remembered wondering what the world's edge was: a wall? A cliff? Did heaven come down to touch it so that 'a Man with Difficulty could Creep under'? And what was beneath the world: pillars, water? If so, what was beneath them? Finally, he learned that the answer surpassed any of his speculations:

Little did I think that the Earth was Round, and the World so full of Beauty, Light, and Wisdom. When I saw that, I knew by the Perfection of the Work there was a

⁵⁸ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), I.110-1, 113, 115, 116.

⁵⁹ Edward Herbert of Cherbury, *The Life of Edward, First Lord Herbert of Cherbury written by himself*, ed. J. M. Shuttleworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 11.

⁶⁰ Traherne, *Centuries*, I.111, 115, 118.

⁶¹ Traherne, *Centuries*, I.119, 128-30.

GOD, and was satisfied, and Rejoyced. People underneath and feilds and flowers with another Sun and another Day Pleased me mightily: but more when I knew it was the same Sun that served them by night, that served us by Day.⁶²

Every child learns that the world is round, sooner or later, but not many of us take it as a thunderclap revelation of divine perfection. Perhaps we find this implausible on the grounds that Traherne seems like a rather unusual child. Yet we know for a certainty that he grew up to be a rather unusual man. We do not need to venture into psychohistory to guess that the child who was father to that man may also have had something distinctive about him.

The value of Norwood, Isham and Traherne's stories – if any – is not that they represent typical forms of Protestant childhood. They were, like all of us, minorities of one. What they remind us is that children are individuals; that neither happy nor unhappy families resemble one another very closely; that children take themselves, their world and their religion immensely seriously, and can be very finely attuned to managing the loving, unpredictable, condescending, inattentive and sometimes incomprehensibly punitive adult world. These are not typical Protestant children, because there was no such creature. What there were were certain shared patterns. But the neglect with which Protestantism treated children, while it is thoroughly frustrating for historians and was certainly sometimes damaging to those who experienced their religion as a simple set of strictures and disciplines, may also sometimes have proved unexpectedly benign. The religious life of early modern Protestants was generally fairly tightly scripted, but less so for children than for any other stage of life. Beyond some general framing strictures, they and their families were generally left to work out their own salvation in fear and trembling – or even, as Traherne shows us could be possible, 'in the Peace and Purity of all our Soul'.⁶³

⁶² Traherne, *Centuries*, I.119-120.

⁶³ Traherne, *Centuries*, I.113.