

William C. Prevette, *Child, Church and Compassion: Towards Child Theology in Romania* (Oxford: Regnum, 2012)

Faced with a deteriorating economic situation during communist rule, Romanian couples increasingly decided against having children to avoid the financial burden. Ceaucescu attempted to reverse the ensuing population decline by banning abortion and imposing heavy taxes on the childless. A pattern emerged. Couples would have as many kids as possible to avoid the tax. But with inadequate means for their support, tens of thousands of children per annum (p. 68) were abandoned, left to rot in a clandestine system of medical facilities or to a brutal life on the streets. The growing crisis was kept under wraps until Ceau?escu's execution in 1989; when its scope became general knowledge, Western humanitarian aid agencies, with little understanding of the cultural, political, and ethnic sensitivities in Romania, rushed to provide help. A subset of these agencies, evangelical Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs after NGOs), saw a further, spiritual need in the fall of communism. They entered Romania both to respond to children in crisis and to spread the Gospel.

While the bulk of *Child, Church and Compassion* analyzes the relationships between FBOs and local Romanian evangelical churches in cooperative efforts to respond to the Romanian child crisis, neither FBO/church relations nor children is what the book is about. (So, if you're after an account of the Romanian child crisis, keep looking.) It is, rather, a work of child theology and what I'll call—to distinguish it from other forms of holism—"missiological holism" that uses the Romanian child crisis as a backdrop.

Child theology takes the child to be an indicator or pointer to the Kingdom of God. By placing the child "in the midst" (from Matthew 18, it's a slogan for the movement) of theological consideration, practitioners gain a perspective from which to do theology. Note well, however, that while child theology gives the child a central place, its goal is an understanding of the Kingdom. It is not primarily directed to the child; it is directed at the Kingdom through the child.

Missiological holism is intended to counteract dualism. Mission can fail in one of two directions: it can be “vertically” (p. 263) oriented towards eternal salvation, an approach that tends to ignore material, psychological, and social needs, resulting in instances of “transactionalism” (p. 222), the economic exchange of conversion for aid; or, it can be “horizontally” (p. 264) focused on material, psychological and social needs, while neglecting the religious dimension of mission, sometimes resulting in “managerial missiology” (p. 39), no different from atheist interventions. The claim of missiological holism is that the proper disposition is one that attends to both the vertical and horizontal dimensions in unison.

Evangelical churches, isolated from larger Romanian society and the global Christian community during the communist era, tended to be insular and “vertical.” Pastors were perplexed about why at-risk children should be their concern, were resistant to sharing scarce resources with those outside of the community of believers, and were distrustful of other organizations. FBOs, on the other hand, tended to be “horizontal.” They incorporated the methods of the social sciences, operated in the same way as secular humanitarian aid agencies (NGOs), and focussed on providing interventions directly to individual at-risk children. Because of their opposing prejudices, the initial meeting of FBOs and churches was typified by misunderstanding, mistrust, and misallocation of resources. Only those FBOs and churches that embraced the tensions at play had a measure of success in overcoming them.

From the analysis of FBO/church relations, two conclusions are given. The first is that mission should not aim at the unilateral transformation of those in need, but at the dialectical transforming of all involved. A holistic approach does indeed attend to the child’s spiritual and bodily needs, but it also involves the metamorphosis of the family, the local church, the broader community, the intervener, and the aid agency. The second is that sin and failure are permanent features of work with children in crisis, and should be expected mission outcomes. What this indicates is that the Kingdom of God likewise includes sin and failure—it encompasses a fallen world.

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Theological matters aside, Bill Prevette, the book's author, is a missionary and child advocate, who has spent the last thirty years helping children in crisis in North America, Asia, and Eastern Europe. He is on faculty at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, and is a board member of several international Faith-Based Organizations. *Child, Church and Compassion* is his Ph.D. dissertation. It is the result of a field-research project carried out from 2002-2008, while Dr. Prevette was working directly with FBOs, local churches and at-risk children in Romania. The book is an excellent account of complex frontline missionary work that only someone with years of practicing in situ, and with the particular connections its author has, could give. Although it is set in an idiosyncratic time and place, the book's key insights are generalizable. It contains a myriad of useful bits of practical wisdom that would be of benefit to novice missionaries and humanitarian aid workers.

As mentioned, the book was written as a dissertation. The problem is that it reads like one. Chapter 4, for instance, discusses research methods in great detail, which may be an important thing to do in a dissertation, but seems out of place in this book. Moreover, a few grammar and syntax errors are to be expected in a work of this length. But there are numerous and persistent mistakes throughout, many of which are egregious (see the title of Chapter 6 for an example). Editorial scrutiny should have remade the dissertation into something more of a book and eliminated most of the simple mistakes prior to publication.

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