

Another of Wilde's key insights is the role of networks in controlling the agenda of a large group. This observation has been made in other religious contexts (for example, Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990]), but Wilde is the first to apply it to the 3,000 Bishop-Delegates to the Vatican Council. As a result of their extensive networking, the so-called "Domus Mariae" bishops were able to communicate with almost 75 percent of the delegates quite quickly. In contrast, the conservative bishops were limited to contacting like-minded delegates one at a time. As Ammerman has previously pointed out in her study of liberals and conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention, each side's ideology was a key resource, either legitimating or preventing such networking.

I can find very little to criticize about this book. My sole quibble is a minor one—the footnote numbering appears to be "one off" in several places—most notably between footnotes 25–70 in chapter 2, which do not match the numbers in the text. Otherwise, speaking as a sociologist, I find *Vatican II* to be a path-breaking work, one that will influence the field of the sociology of religion for many years to come. Historians, too, will appreciate the chance to get inside the workings of a usually opaque process, whose controversies reverberate to the present day. I urge scholars from both disciplines—and interested Church officials and laity as well—to avail themselves of the opportunity.

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When I Was a Child: Children's Interpretations of First Communion.

By **Susan Ridgely Bales**. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiii + 257 pp. \$55.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

In *When I Was a Child*, Susan Ridgely Bales challenges scholars of religion to add age to the standard analytical categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality when interpreting religious experience. As her main work, Bales presents a careful ethnographic analysis of the attitudes and beliefs of children throughout the process of preparation for and reception of the Catholic sacrament of First Communion. Bales pauses midway through her presentation of her ethnographic project to describe a new methodology for studying children as subjects and informants.

Bales's study follows two classes of first communicants in different parishes through the yearlong process of preparing for and receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist for the first time. She is attentive to regional, ethnic, and

racial components of children's identities, describing differences in the ways the first communion service was celebrated in African American, Latino, and Euro-Catholic families. Her sensitive ethnography uncovers some surprising insights into children's experience of the sacrament. Whereas adults presented first communion in theological and intellectual terms, the children Bales studied approached preparation for and reception of the sacrament as a sensory experience. On one level, children invested great care in learning the physical actions the ritual required, obsessively practicing and self-consciously performing motions of kneeling, cupping their hands to receive the Eucharist, and making the sign of the cross. On another sensory level, children were both intrigued and somewhat concerned about how the body and blood of Christ might taste. Bales repeatedly pushes against the assumption of both catechists and parents in the classes she observed that children passively absorbed information that was communicated to them. Instead, Bales asserts that children evaluated information that was offered in Faith Formation classes, interpreted it in unique and diverse ways, and developed unique understandings of the sacrament. So, for example, while adults emphasized to children that First Communion was about their inclusion in the universal Church, children understood the ritual as a way of gaining visibility and importance in their local parish.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Bales's study is her frank discussion of the issues surrounding ethnographic research using children as primary informants, and her explanation of how her method of research developed and changed when applied "on the ground," in interactions with children. Bales is critical of scholarly approaches to children based on developmental psychology. Such models approach children as "adults in the making," she argues, interpreting differences between the perceptions of adults and children within a rubric of children's developmental inferiority that leads to dismissive interpretations of children's perspectives as transitory, immature, and incomplete. According to Bales, these approaches to children miss the powerful reality that children do not experience their own interpretations as transitional but rather as powerfully and insistently real. She advocates for replacing this "adultist" model of approaching children with a "child centered" one that takes children's perspectives seriously.

Bales is careful to limit the claims she believes she can make about children's religious experiences. "While I would never claim to know the religious worlds of the children I studied," she writes, "I can analyze how they *represent* those worlds through their words and their actions" (55). Bales is not unduly idealistic about her method. She maintains an awareness of the tensions inherent in a research strategy of letting children "speak for themselves" (2). She readily acknowledges that it is difficult for adults to access children's worlds of meaning and language, that she struggled to overcome the power

differential between herself and her child informants, and that translating children's conceptual idioms for adult readers is problematic. Still, the novelty and depth of her insights into children's perspectives constitute a convincing argument for the utility of her method.

The book is aided by the strategic placement of children's drawings throughout the text to illustrate the larger point Bales makes about children's experiences. The drawings Bales includes allow readers to enter children's worlds more directly, to see for themselves the tropes, images, and patterns that Bales identified in her own research. The images also flesh out Bales's approach, providing readers with concrete points of reference for her interpretive reading of children's articulations in artwork.

When I Was a Child focuses almost exclusively on the voices and experiences of children, occasionally contrasting them with the lessons given by adult catechists and the hopes of parents. The self-imposed limits of her study do not allow her to interrogate what adults reveal about themselves and their religious views and experiences in Faith Formation classes, but this raises intriguing questions about the fantasies and needs that adults bring to their religious encounters with children. Bales's observation that adults placed significant emotional importance in the idea that children always know that they are loved by God, even when they feel alone, raised questions for this reader about the extent to which the emotional investment of adult catechists in God's unconditional love might stem either from their unfulfilled desires to be loved as children or from a desire to themselves feel so loved in the present moment.

Problematic elements in this book are few. One weakness of Bales's presentation is the monochromatic portrait of a monolithically Protestant South that periodically appears in her text. Bales argues that Catholic identity is especially important in the South, where Catholics are conscious of their status as religious minorities, and adults believed that children's Catholic identity was "at risk" from the dominant Protestant culture. Rather than portray the research triangle area of North Carolina as representative of trends throughout the South, it would have been more helpful, and certainly more accurate, to view the region of her research as a Protestant-dominated portion of the South, contrasted with areas like Maryland, Louisiana, and parts of Tennessee where Catholicism historically has been a significant if not majority religion, and where it continues to have explicit cultural power.

This small criticism aside, *When I Was a Child* is a compelling account of children's religious experiences, and a provocative call for further research on this topic.

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