

EDUCATING THE BODY OF THE FEMALE CHILD: FEMINISMS IN DIALOGUE WITH JEROME (D 420)

Christina Landman

Research Institute for Theology and Religion
University of South Africa

Abstract

At the beginning of the 5th century, Jerome sent a letter to Laeta, the daughter of his co-ascetic Paula, on how to raise a female child. Jerome, in short, views disembodiment as redemption, and therefore also as the final goal of education. In this article, different views on the embodiment of the female child are placed in dialogue with Jerome. These views are informed, mainly but not exclusively, by feminist notions of the body as expressed (1) in Body Theology, (2) in the International Resilience Project, and (3) in work on the intersection between feminisms and childhood education. Views on the education of the female child as educating her towards the embodiment of relationship, resilience and interconnectedness are put forward to invite dialogue from Jerome whose work was seminal in starting a tradition of an 'education of disembodiment' in the Christian tradition.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim

The immediate aim of this article is to put feminist views on the body of the female child in dialogue with Jerome's views on raising a child as expressed in his letter to his friend Laeta in 401 AD.

A secondary aim of the article is to raise awareness of the negative views on the female body that originated in the 4th century and dominated Christian thought during the middle ages, the Protestant

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Reformation and the modern missionary period up to the present. Alternating these views with contemporary feminist views may open up the future for the liberation of the female body within the parameters of a healthy resilience.

1.2 Role players

The role players in this article are:

- (1) Jerome as representative of 4th/5th century views on the female body. As source for this voice, Jerome's letter to Laeta on how to raise her newly born baby, Paula (Letter CVII: *Ad Laetam, De Institutione Filiae*¹) will be used. The letter was probably written in 401 AD.
- (2) Lisa Isherwood as the doyenne of *body theology*, a recent development in feminist theology. Her voice will be sourced from the book she has written with Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing body theology*,² and an article published in *Embodying feminist liberation theologies*, entitled 'The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: The Spiralling of Incarnation'.³
- (3) Mary Hauser and Janice Jipson entering into 'A conversation about the intersections of feminisms and early childhoods' in their book *Intersections: Feminisms/early childhoods*.⁴ This is a feminist view on childhoods, albeit not theological, and serves the aim of this article to challenge Jerome on child rearing.
- (4) Edith Grotberg as a leading figure in the International Resilience Project. The obvious place from where to retrieve her voice is an article she wrote on 'The International Resilience Project' in a book edited by Mary John, *A charge against society*.⁵ Reference will also be made to other project enhancing resilience in children, such as the book edited by Ray DeV Peters, Bonnie Leadbeater and Robert J McMahon, *Resilience in children, families, and communities*,⁶ and the Memory Box Project headed by Philippe Denis and described

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in the book *Never too small to remember*.⁷ These voices are not primarily feminist nor are they coming from a faith perspective. However, they are useful in reaching the aim of this article, that is, to dialogue from an alternative position with Jerome's views on what makes a child strong.

2 JEROME'S LETTER TO LAETA ON RAISING A FEMALE BODY

Laeta, the daughter-in-law of Jerome's companion in asceticism, Paula, gave birth to a daughter in Rome in the year 401 AD. She named the girl after her grandmother Paula, and wrote to Jerome in Bethlehem, asking his advice on raising the child as a devoted virgin.⁸ Jerome responded with an elaborate letter (letter 107) with advice on how the little Paula's mind should be expanded through the right education. Finding no overlap between mind and body, Jerome dedicated almost half the letter (parts 5, 8, 10-13) to explaining how little Paula's body should be inhibited, by the following means:

- *Paula must be taught not to beautify her body.* That means that she is not to have her ears pierced, not to wear make-up or jewellery, and not to colour her hair (par 5).
- *Paula must be taught abstinence in feeding and bathing her body.* While she is still small, she is to bathe when required, take a little wine for her stomach and sometimes eat meat (par 8). However, when she has grown up, her food is to be herbs and bread, with one or two small fishes occasionally, leaving her always somewhat hungry (par 10). As far as bathing is concerned, she is not to bathe with eunuchs or married women, since eunuchs remain men after all, and the women with child are a revolting spectacle (par 11). Preferably she is not to bathe at all.
- *Paula is to subject her bodily lusts.* She is not to see herself naked. She is to fast, and quench the desires of youth. She is furthermore to deliberately spoil her natural good looks (par 11).
- *Paula must be taught to make her body useful.* She is to learn how to spin wool. She is not to expose her body to silk, fleeces

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or brocades, but to spin wool for her own garments to keep her warm (par 10).

- *Paula must be taught to read bodily references in the Scriptures as descriptions of spirituality.* The Song of Songs is to be the last book read by Paula, and only when she understands that, although it is written in fleshly words, it is a marriage song of a spiritual bridal.⁹

Finally, Jerome recommends that Paula be sent to the monastery presided over by Eustochium for the final enclosure of her body (par 13). This, incidentally, became history when Paula was indeed sent to this monastery and eventually succeeded Eustochium as abbess.

Jerome's views on educating the body of the female girl can be summarized as follows in his own words (par 13): *sit in carne, sine carne*: While in the flesh, let her be without the flesh.

From the above it can be deduced that Jerome's view on the female body feeds primarily on two binaries, which are

- the body as dispensable *versus* the soul as superior, and
- disembodiment as redemption *versus* embodiment as shameful.

Subsequently, feminist views on the female body will be placed in dialogue with these two notions of Jerome, that is, the subjection of the body to the soul, and the subjection of femininity to male concepts of sinfulness.

3 FEMINIST VIEWS ON THE BODY OF THE FEMALE CHILD

3.1 Body theology

Body theology deals with the adult female body as a product of societal and ecclesiastical discourses shaping the body of the female child. In *Introducing body theology*, Lisa Isherwood indicates that Christian history has romantically turned the young virgin body into

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“the most powerful symbol of the transformed resurrected body”,¹⁰ thereby not only feeding the dualism between body and soul, but also placing the male in position to marginalise the female as ‘the other’. In extreme humility, Isherwood says, male discourses have acquired for themselves spirit, culture and rationality, burdening women with emotionality, flesh and nature - and chaining them to “a history of guilt and shame”.¹¹

In her essay “Embodiment of feminist liberation theology”, Isherwood not only points to the damage this dualism has done to women’s bodies over the ages, damage that is still prevalent. She also argues for the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the non-metaphysics for the radical embodiment of believers today. This calls for the acknowledgment that human and divine dwells in one flesh, whether it be male or female.¹²

“God took the risk of leaping into flesh, yet we have been encouraged to resist our enfleshment”, Isherwood laments. However, embodiment opens up (at least) the following avenues when we undertake the risky business of committing ourselves to flesh, and embody ourselves as bearers of both the divine and the human:

- The resurrection of the body becomes more than the story of Jesus.
- This memory empowers us towards political and intimate connections.
- The transfiguration and ascension of Jesus signal the acceptance that Jesus’s body is gone, but the power of his presence remains constant.
- Pentecost symbolises the acceptance of one’s incarnation through finding a voice.
- Jesus’s dealings with food in the feeding of the thousands and in the Last Supper point towards our political obligation to fight the inequality of access to food in many parts of the world.
- Jesus touching the woman with the haemorrhage reminds us not to forget the power of touch and “that we can transform the world through touch”.¹³

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Isherwood, then, would enter into dialogue with Jerome's *sit in carne, sine carne* by arguing "that unless we are fully in our bodies we will never be able to fully explore our divinity".¹⁴ Isherwood would refer to the incarnation of the divine body as the power behind this argument.

3.2 The International Resilience Project

With Isherwood and *body theology* as the theological voices behind embodiment, I now also want to invite the voices of children to join in the dialogue with Jerome on raising the female child. I do this by means of Edith Grotberg's description of the International Resilience Project. This project sets out to promote resilience in children, the basic unit for the study being the child in context. Resilience is defined as a capacity which allows a child to minimise or overcome the damaging effects of adversity. A child is considered to be between the ages of 6 and 11.¹⁵

From the voices of children themselves, the International Resilience Project has identified 15 factors that contribute to resilience in children, factors that can be divided equally into three major categories, namely I HAVE, I AM, and I CAN.

It will now be indicated how Jerome's advice on raising Paula corresponds to the category of I HAVE, but that his advice lacks the I AM as well as the I CAN dimensions. That means that Jerome misses out precisely on advising the little girl on her *embodiment*! He concentrates on her support systems, that are virgins who are in a variety of relationships towards her, but fails to advise her on embodying power and relationship within herself. Embodiment, as defined by *body theology*, is the capability for developing your body as a site of relationship, and this is sorely absent in Jerome's view on raising the female child.

To proceed, then, let us look at how Jerome fills the I HAVE categories recommended by the International Resilience Project (from here on referred to as IRP) and confirmed by children as factors for enhancing resilience in children:

I HAVE:

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- *Trusting relationships.* The IRP points here to the unconditional love a child has to experience from parents and caregivers. Jerome, too, recommends that relationships be introduced into Paula's life. However, the emphasis is not so much on trust, even less on love, than on a caregiver who will keep her away from the outside world (par 5). Paula is to consort only with virgins who keep to their vows (par 11).
- *Structure and rules at home.* The IRP recommends that boundaries be set at home, and when the child oversteps them, the child must be made to understand what (s)he has done wrong, given a chance to explain himself/herself, punished and forgiven. Jerome, indeed, is a master at setting structure and rules for the growing child. His letter to Laeta on how to raise Paula consists of about a hundred rules to be obeyed by the little girl. Although Jerome calls for leniency in matters such as fasting and bathing, he does not even consider the possibility of the child overstepping these rules or that punishment will ever have to be given. Jerome only allows for obedience, which is also given as a rule. Jerome, however, does relate what happens to a virgin who betrays her vows. She will be carried off to hell and bereaved of what is precious to her. "So terribly does Christ punish those who violate His temple, and so jealously does He defend His precious jewels" (par 5). Obviously, according to Jerome, the little girl's body does not belong to her anymore.
- *Role models.* The IRP explores people both inside and outside the family to act as the child's role models in behaviour and morality, and to teach the child the fundamentals of his/her religion. Jerome recommends that Paula takes as her role model somebody who is "pale and serious, somberly attired, and with the hue of melancholy," preferably "some aged virgin of approved faith, character, and chastity, apt to instruct her by word and by example" (par 9).
- *Encouragement to be autonomous.* The IRP sees parents encouraging the child to do things on his/her own and to seek

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help when needed, according to the child's temperament. Jerome is not in favour of a young girl becoming autonomous. He refers to Eli who was held responsible for his children even when they were grown up. A girl in particular should be shielded from "the hammer of the whole earth" (Jer 1:23) (par 6).

- *Access to health and education.* The IRP indicates that a child should have access to services not provided for by parents, such as hospitals, school and social services. For Jerome, the family and the church/monastery are adequate to provide the child with everything. Paula is to be taught at home how to read and write, and a person of learning is to be rented to further her studies, preferable a high-born virgin (par 4).

In short, then, the IRP sees the I HAVE category, that is, the category exploring the child's external support systems, as one dimension only of a child developing resilience. Jerome, on the other hand, places the whole of the child's education in the hands of external figures whom he identifies as virgins and others who would keep Paula from having contact with the outside world.

Hence, let us look at Jerome's failure to direct Paula towards the development of resilience internally (that is, the I AM and the I CAN categories in the IRP language), and therefore his reluctance to have her *embody* resilience (in the language of *body theology*):

I AM:

- *Lovable and my temperament is appealing.* The IRP points to a strong child as one who strikes an appropriate balance between attracting attention and lapsing into silence. Jerome recommends that whenever she sees him, Paula should jump into the arms of her grandfather who was not a Christian, and should sing Alleluia in his ears. However, apart from focusing her lovable temperament to convert the heathen, Paula was to be surrounded by non-frivolous people. Her "nurse must not be intemperate, or loose, or given to gossip. Her bearer must be respectable, and her fosterfather of grave demeanour" (par 4).¹⁶

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- *Loving, empathic and altruistic.* The IRP sketches as child that cares about other people. Jerome, however, does not allow the young female child contact with other people. She is not to bathe or eat with others, and not to attend weddings. She is to consort only with virgins (par 10).
- *Proud of myself.* The IRP points to a child who has confidence and self-esteem. Jerome, however, rules that the young girl should neglect her body by not combing her hair, by fasting, and eventually not even bathing. She should blush even at the idea of seeing herself undressed (par 11). Jerome does not even allow pride of the mind, since that would not suit the desired image of (female) humility.
- *Autonomous and responsible.* The IRP envisages a child who can do things on his/her own and accept the consequences. However, Jerome is adamant that Paula should be discouraged from assuming autonomy and responsibility. She is to hear nothing or say nothing that is worldly; she is not even to understand unclean words or (worldly) songs; boys with lustful thoughts must be kept away from her (par 4). She is not to go abroad, nor appear in public alone, and not even to go to church on her own. She is not to greet young men even with a smile; she should neither eat nor bathe with others (par 8, 9).
- *Filled with hope, faith and trust.* The IRP views a resilient child as one who knows right from wrong, has confidence in goodness and may channel this into religious belief. Again, Jerome takes for granted that the young girl will hope, trust and have faith. Yet, her hope is on the world not yet come, which is dependent on her ability to shun this one.

I CAN:

- *Communicate.* The IRP sees a resilient child as one who can express his or her feelings, listen to others, and act on the communication. Jerome, for his part, is concerned with the girl's communication only in that she should sound educated, and not form the habit of shortening long words (par 4).

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- *Solve a problem.* The IRP pictures a child as negotiating problems towards solutions. The aim of the education presented by Jerome is that there will be no problems for a child to solve when all rules have been obeyed.
- *Manage my feelings and impulses.* The IRP commends the resilient child as one who can recognise his/her feelings, and manage the impulse towards harmful behaviour. Again, Jerome's education aims at keeping the child away from temptations which, according to Jerome, will rule out the possibility of unruly and undesirable behaviour.
- *Gauge the temperament of myself and others.* The IRP pictures a child with insight into his/her own temperament and the ability to adapt his/her actions accordingly. Jerome, however, prescribes temperament and directs education towards teaching the child not to explore temperament but to develop the correct one, which is one of apathy towards one's own feelings.
- *Seek trusting relationships.* The IRP views a resilient child as one who can find a trustful person to discuss problems and solutions with. Again, Jerome teaches that the desired relationships should be provided for the child, and not sought by the child herself.

It can be argued that it is unfitting to place modern-day children who participated in the International Resilience Project in dialogue with Jerome who is preparing a child for a virginal life in a monastery. However, Jerome himself considered virginity as 'normal' and to be recommended for the upbringing of all girls (see par 13). On the other hand, too, the children of the IRP are not leading 'normal' lives in the sense that they themselves have identified poverty, war and domestic strife as the circumstances in which they have to develop resilience.

The children who participated in the IRP, then, would enter into dialogue with Jerome precisely on this point: that the education he

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recommends offers restricted resilience to children in that he tries to protect the child through external support systems and rules of obedience. *Body theology* would add a voice to this, arguing that Jerome's disembodiment of the girl child, which he claims leads to redemption, leaves the child without opportunities and skills to develop resilience.

3.3 Intersections between feminism and early childhoods

In the above discussion, the feminist theologians of *body theology* and the children of the International Resilience Project have been placed in dialogue with Jerome on the issue of the embodiment of relationship and resilience. Can a child be educated to explore his/her body as a site of relationship with the human and the divine (*body theology*), as well as a site of resilience (IRP)? Or is education most effective when it builds a wall around the child (Jerome)?

In reflecting on the relationship between children and early childhood teachers, Mary Hauser and Janice Jipson in their book on the intersection between feminisms and early childhoods, go into dialogue with dominant ideology on the issue of *power* in the teacher-child relationship. They ask whether feminisms have, at all, influenced the nature of early childhood education.

The research of Hauser and Jipson is informed by two questions that are of relevance to our dialogue with Jerome. These are:¹⁷

- What does an early childhood teacher education program that values caring, connectedness, and collaboration (as feminist values) look like?
- Do the curriculum and the interactions between students and teachers provide an expression of alternative forms of power relations?

From her own life story, Janice describes her growing feminist awareness on childhood education within the following insights:

- Giving birth and mothering a child assisted her in developing a feminist identity of nurturance, an identity that she was to

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extend to the classroom in terms of the values of interconnectedness and bonding. This dialectical relationship between mothering and teaching enabled her to shift the traditional values of authoritarian power in the classroom to that of questioning and resistance against dominant ideologies.¹⁸

- Becoming aware of the classroom as a site for introducing a child into an interpretive community, she became wary of her complicity in the oppression of the female child.¹⁹

If Janice could have asked Jerome the two questions that inform her research, the entry points for dialoguing with Jerome would have been obvious. They would dialogue on

- the power relations between teacher and child, and
- the gendered nature of the interpretive community into which the child is introduced in formal education.

Jerome's answers to these questions would be typical of one who had stood at the initiation of childhood education that became normative in Christianity. In short, his answer would acknowledge the authority of teacher over child, and soul over body, thus prescribing an interpretive community into which a majority of childhood educations were to occur. Proof of this ideology from Jerome's letter would lie in its introduction (par 1) where Jerome already preaches against the relaxation of the bonds of discipline, and warns against the teacher whose approach is too indulgent.

4 CONCLUSION: IN DIALOGUE WITH JEROME

The 4th and 5th centuries of the Christian era saw the initiation of views on education that would influence Christian thinking for centuries, views that socially alienated the female child from her body. Challenging Jerome's "education for disembodiment", this article has invited the voices of women (most of them feminists) to speak on education as embodiment, with special reference to the female child.

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From this research, embodied education has emerged as:

- education that embodies the female child as a site of both resistance and relationship, thus assisting the child to embody the divine within herself (*body theology*);
- education that embodies resilience in children exploring the spaces between external sources of resilience (I HAVE) and internal ones (I CAN, I AM) (The International Resilience Project);
- education that embodies the girl child as an interconnected female in an interpretive community that is based on equality (Intersections: Feminisms and Childhoods).

This dialogue, inspired by feminist thinking, may prove to open up new avenues for Christian education.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 Saint Jérôme, *Lettres*, Tome V. Texte établi et traduit par J Labourt (Paris: Société d'édition, 1955), 144-157.
 - 2 Lisa Isherwood & Elizabeth Stuart 1998. *Introducing body theology*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press. For this study, a sub-section entitled 'Change and decay: The body and Early Christianity' was of special significance (64-67).
 - 3 Lisa Isherwood 2004. The embodiment of feminist liberation theology: The spiraling of incarnation, in Beverley Clack (ed), *Embodying feminist liberation theologies. A special edition of Feminist Theology* 12(2), 140-156. London: Continuum Publishing.
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 - 5 Edith Grotberg 1997. The International Resilience Project, in Mary John (ed), *A charge against society: The child's right to protection*, 19-32. London & Bristol, Pennsylvania: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
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 - 8 See J N D Kelly, Jerome, his life, writings, and controversies (Duckworth 1975, 273-275).
 - 9 In this summary of Jerome's letter, I have often made use of the translation of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, under the editorial supervision of Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Vol VI. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989, 189-195.
 - 10 Isherwood, *Introducing body theology*, 65.
 - 11 Isherwood, *The embodiment of feminist liberation theology*, 141.
 - 12 Ibid, 144-145.
 - 13 Ibid, 146-147.
 - 14 Ibid, 49.
 - 15 Grotberg, *The International Resilience Project*, 19.
 - 16 In this subsection, again, use has been made of the beautiful translation of Letter by 107 provided in Schaff and Wace.
 - 17 Hauser & Jipson, *Intersections: Feminisms/Early Childhoods*, 6.
 - 18 Ibid, 11.
 - 19 Ibid, 13, 14.