

Hovland, Ingie. 2012. Review of *The Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood*, by Anne Phillips. In *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27(2), 342-343.

The Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood

ANNE PHILLIPS, 2011

Farnham, Surrey & Burlington, VT: Ashgate

203 pp., £45.00, US\$ (hb)

ISBN 978-1-4094-2198-6

Last week I was sitting next to a friend and her 11 year old daughter. I had just read Anne Phillips's *The Faith of Girls* about 11-13 year old girls, and it is a testament to the strength of Phillips's description and thoughtful exposition that I found myself curious in a new way about what the 11 year old was engaged in; wondering (to myself) whether she might be experiencing a deeper sense of sadness as she approaches puberty, what kind of identities she might be trying out that week, and what kind of thoughts—about herself, about spiritual matters—she might be playing with.

A central strength of Phillips's book is her ability to bring the transitional world of 11-13 year old girls to life. The analysis in *The Faith of Girls* is based on ethnographic data from interviews with 17 girls, 11-13 years old, in five churches in the UK, all within the Free Church traditions but representing a variety of theological positions from 'liberal' to 'evangelical'. Phillips clearly put much thought into developing rapport with the girls and setting up questions and prompts (including pictures) that would elicit free-flowing responses. The good results of this are evident in the trust that the girls display and the candour of some of their responses.

The Faith of Girls is divided into nine chapters. Chapters 1-3 include an introduction, a theoretical chapter that provides an outline of Phillips's interlocutors (including interesting reflections on Luce Irigaray), and a detailed methodological chapter. Chapters 4-8 present the girls' responses alongside Phillips's interpretations. Two of these chapters are brief vignettes, focusing in more depth on the lines of thought developed by two of the girls, while the remaining three chapters present the girls in transitional space (their thoughts on being a girl at this age), 'Godspace' (the meanings faith has for them and the strategies of 'faithing' that they adopt), and nurturing space (the types of relationships and environment the girls interact with in their churches). Phillips has thought a great deal about the girls' responses. This extends into a clear respect for the girls in her sample as well as to girls and boys in general, which lends a refreshing tone to the text. She convincingly emphasises the girls' ability to 'do theology' with the resources available to them.

The last of the analytical chapters (chapter 8) contains another key strength of this work, namely Phillips's use of the wombing metaphor. Put briefly, it enables the reader to think about a relationship in which the more powerful person offers an environment that holds without constraining. The womb stretches in order to be safe and nourishing, while the baby creates her own inner spaces and movements. I cannot discuss the many nuances of this rich image here, but suffice it to say that Phillips draws out parallels to the protecting boundary of the outer chorion membrane, the 'playroom' of the amniotic waters, and the connecting organ of the placenta. The image's capacity to encompass both relationship and autonomy fits well with the thoughts voiced by the girls about their need for safety as well as freedom, and functions as a good analytical tool in thinking about their responses. In my view this is the strongest analytical contribution of the work, easily applicable far more widely. The concluding chapter 9 develops the imagery further by seeing the ideal role of the church—and the girls' wider environment—as midwife, i.e. a companion who fosters mutual trust and respect for the other's individual expression through a powerful period of something new emerging.

While *The Faith of Girls* is positioned within the discipline of theology, I believe students and researchers in other disciplines would find the work interesting and applicable. In particular, the careful description of the methodology and ethical considerations would be useful for anyone carrying out research with children, and the womb image as an analytical tool would be relevant for any study grappling with the connection and differentiation between individual and community (in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary interpretation, etc.). *The Faith of Girls* is written in a clear style and chapters 4-9, which present the girls' responses, would be accessible to educated youth leaders, community or church members.

Perhaps most importantly, this book is able to communicate to those who read it some of Phillips's thoughtful confidence, enabling readers later to sit down next to an 11 year old girl and be interested in her world, in her self, and in what she has to say.