tasavvur

tekirdag ilahiyat dergisi | tekirdag theology journal

e-ISSN: 2619-9130

tasavvur, Aralık/December 2025, c. 11, s. 2: 1339-1348

Mirjam Zimmermann, *Kindertheologie als theologische Kompetenz von Kindern.* Grundlagen, Methodik und Ziel kindertheologischer Forschung am Beispiel der Deutung des Todes Jesu.

Mirjam Zimmermann, Children's theology as a theological competence of children. Foundations, methodology, and objectives of children's theological research using the example of the interpretation of Jesus' death.

Kübra ÇAVUŞ

Arş. Gör. Dr. Atatürk Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Alman Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Alman Dili ve Edebiyat Anabilim Dalı

Research Assistant Dr. Atatürk University, Faculty of Letters, German Language and Literature

Erzurum, Türkiye

Email: kubracavus@atauni.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0001-6373-5272

DOI: 10.47424/tasavvur.1778820

Makale Bilgisi | Article Information

Makale Türü / Article Type: Kitap İncelemesi / Book Review

Geliş Tarihi / Date Received: 05 Eylül / September 2025

Kabul Tarihi / Date Accepted: 28 Kasım / November 2025

Yayın Tarihi / Date Published: 31 Aralık/ December 2025

Yayın Sezonu / Pub Date Season: Aralık / December

Atıf / Citation: Çavuş, Kübra . " Mirjam Zimmermann, Kindertheologie als theologische Kompetenz von Kindern. Grundlagen, Methodik und Ziel kindertheologischer Forschung am Beispiel der Deutung des Todes Jesu.Makale Başlığı". *Tasavvur - Tekirdağ İlahiyat Dergisi* 11 / 2 (Aralık 2025): 1339-1348. https://doi.org/10.47424/1778820

İntihal: Bu makale, ithenticate yazılımınca taranmıştır. İntihal tespit edilmemiştir.

Plagiarism: This article has been scanned by ithenticate. No plagiarism detected.

web: http://dergipark.gov.tr/tasavvur | mailto: ilahiyatdergi@nku.edu.tr

Mirjam Zimmermann's *Kindertheologie als theologische Kompetenz von Kindern* constitutes a foundational contribution to contemporary discussions on child theology, as it offers an in-depth and systematically structured analysis of how children formulate and articulate theological thought. Rather than reducing child theology to a pedagogical tool or a supplementary dimension of religious education, Zimmermann positions it as an independent theological discipline that acknowledges children as capable and meaningful theological agents. Her work is particularly noteworthy for demonstrating that children's theological utterances are not random, naïve, or purely developmentally driven statements; instead, they represent coherent, interpretable, and categorically distinguishable forms of theological competence. By framing children's reflections within specific analytical categories, Zimmermann provides a robust conceptual lens through which their theological reasoning can be examined, valued, and integrated into broader theological discourse.

Building on the framework outlined in *Grundlagen, Methodik und Ziel kindertheologischer Forschung am Beispiel der Deutung des Todes Jesu*, Zimmermann presents a comprehensive exploration of the methodological foundations and practical applications of child theology. The book not only clarifies the theoretical premises of kindertheologische Forschung but also demonstrates how these premises can be implemented through concrete empirical research. By examining children's interpretations of the death of Jesus, Zimmermann illustrates how theological inquiry with children can be methodologically structured, systematically documented, and hermeneutically evaluated. Through this example, she offers a wide methodological spectrum that includes qualitative interviews, narrative analyses, and interpretive procedures aimed at uncovering the depth of children's theological reasoning. Thus, the study serves as both a theoretical guide and a practical model, showing how child theology can be researched, applied, and meaningfully integrated into broader theological discourse.

Zimmermann opens the first major section of her book by laying out, in a remarkably comprehensive and historically informed manner, the intellectual foundations of child theology as a distinct theological discipline. In the introductory pages (pp. 3–6), she argues that child theology must be understood not

as a subsidiary aspect of religious pedagogy but as an independent theological field that recognizes children as genuine producers of theological meaning. She frames this claim by demonstrating that children's utterances possess internal coherence, symbolic structure, and interpretive depth—features traditionally attributed only to adult theological reasoning. The subsequent historical analysis (pp. 7–29) traces the shifting conceptions of childhood across different eras, beginning with ancient societies and biblical texts, where children were acknowledged but rarely considered theological subjects in their own right. Zimmermann's treatment of patristic and medieval sources reveals how theological discourse implicitly shaped—and was shaped by—particular images of the child, even when children themselves were largely silent in these texts. Her discussion of the Reformation, Enlightenment, and Romanticism shows how emerging understandings of personhood, reason, and the inner life gradually expanded the conceptual space in which a theology *with* or *of* children could become thinkable.

Zimmermann's analysis becomes more pointed in her examination of the twentieth century (pp. 25–29), where pedagogical reforms and theological reorientations increasingly positioned the child as an active epistemic agent rather than a passive recipient of doctrine. She identifies the empirical turn of the 1970s (pp. 26–29) as a decisive moment: for the first time, children's own speech acts were treated as legitimate data for theological inquiry, marking a methodological shift that would profoundly shape the discipline's trajectory. In the following section on children's philosophy (pp. 31–44), Zimmermann provides an extensive comparative reading of Lipman's logical-argumentative model, Matthews's and Freese's dialogue-centered approaches, Martens's rationalist orientation, and Horster's Socratic methods. By integrating these philosophical frameworks, she shows that the study of children's theological competence is inseparable from broader questions about children's capacity for reasoning, abstraction, and moral judgment. This interdisciplinary dialogue is one of Zimmermann's major contributions, as it situates child theology within a network of intellectual traditions rather than isolating it within religious pedagogy.

Finally, in her treatment of the emergence of an "explicit child theology" (pp. 46 ff.), Zimmermann argues that the field reaches conceptual maturity when children's theological interpretations become not only observable

phenomena but also objects of systematic theological reflection. She demonstrates that children's meaning-making processes around themes such as death, forgiveness, or divine action exhibit hermeneutical depth that justifies their inclusion within formal theological discourse. The analytical strength of this first section lies in Zimmermann's ability to weave historical description, philosophical analysis, and theological argumentation into a coherent narrative that explains *why* child theology matters. By connecting the past to contemporary methodological developments, she constructs a theoretically robust foundation upon which the empirical and conceptual analyses of later chapters convincingly rest. In this way, Zimmermann's opening section does not merely introduce the field; it legitimizes child theology as an indispensable dimension of modern theological research and provides the intellectual scaffolding necessary for evaluating children's theological competence with academic seriousness.

Zimmermann opens her discussion by stressing a conceptual ambiguity at the core of the discipline: whether "child theology" refers to theology *for* children, theology *about* children, or theology *produced by* children. She argues that this ambiguity is not superficial but historically rooted in the marginalization of children within the theological tradition. The repetition of the term—*Kindertheologie oder Kindertheologie?*—functions as an intentional rhetorical device to highlight the discipline's need for epistemic clarity. For Zimmermann, child theology is not equivalent to religious pedagogy or catechetical instruction; instead, it designates a theological field that acknowledges children as legitimate producers of theological meaning. This conceptual clarification is essential, since without distinguishing the various uses of the term, the discipline risks collapsing into general child-oriented religious education rather than establishing itself as a theological enterprise in its own right (pp. 35–38).

Zimmermann argues that child theology requires an expanded understanding of "theology," one that goes beyond doctrinal precision and academic abstraction to include the human activity of articulating belief, interpreting transcendence, and engaging existential questions. By broadening this definition, she legitimizes children's metaphors, narratives, questions, and imaginative interpretations as genuine theological expressions rather than immature approximations of adult reasoning. She further emphasizes that theological reflection emerges through diverse modes—narrative, symbolic, relational,

experiential, ritual, and dialogical—and that children naturally participate in these forms of meaning-making. This insight challenges adult-centered epistemologies and expands the notion of the theological subject to include not only scholars but also laypersons, communities, and especially children. Because thought and speech are closely intertwined for children, their spontaneous comments, stories, and conversations reveal nuanced attempts to understand divine agency, suffering, justice, and moral order. Zimmermann therefore insists that children's language be taken seriously as a medium of theological reflection, valued not through a developmental-deficit perspective but as authentically hermeneutical engagement with fundamental theological questions (pp. 38–46).

Zimmermann's discussion across pages 111–129 examines both the potential and the limitations of differentiating child theology into the three well-known models of *the theology of children*, *theology for children*, and *theologizing with children*. She argues that while these distinctions offer helpful analytical clarity, they also risk fragmenting a field that is, by nature, interconnected. The theology *of* children highlights children's own perspectives, interpretations, and meaning-making processes, revealing the unique theological insights that emerge from their lived experiences and narrative constructions. In contrast, theology *for* children represents a more normative, adult-generated framework that seeks to prepare, instruct, or guide children theologically—yet it carries the danger of overshadowing the child's own voice with adult authority. By comparison, theologizing *with* children marks a dialogical process in which adults and children mutually engage in inquiry, questioning, and shared interpretation; Zimmermann regards this model as the most promising for contemporary child theology because it foregrounds reciprocal communication and acknowledges children as full theological partners. Nevertheless, she concludes that these three models cannot be meaningfully separated in practice; instead, they together constitute a single, integrated theological approach that arises *from* children, is shaped *with* children, and ultimately serves children *as theological subjects*. From this foundation, Zimmermann turns to the hermeneutical challenges inherent in child theology, emphasizing that the field operates within an unavoidable "hermeneutical circle," insofar as it involves both children's spontaneous theological activity and adults' scholarly interpretation of that

activity. Adults can never be entirely independent observers; their theological frameworks, cultural assumptions, and interpretive habits inevitably influence how children's expressions are analyzed, making the adult an always partially dependent interpreter. This dependence creates a further risk: child theology can become a projection surface for adult theology, especially when adults unconsciously reshape children's statements to fit pre-established doctrinal categories. Zimmermann also warns against the romanticization of childhood through myths of innocence, purity, or innate spiritual wisdom; such idealization distorts real children and obscures the complexity, ambiguity, and developmental dynamics of their actual theological reasoning. For her, these dangers demonstrate the importance of a methodological and hermeneutical discipline that takes children seriously without turning them into theological symbols, ensuring that child theology remains grounded in authentic child perspectives rather than adult projections or myths (pp. 111–129).

In pages 131–159, Zimmermann situates child theology within contemporary debates on educational standards and argues that "theological competence" must be understood more broadly than measurable learning outcomes. She proposes that the three dimensions of child theology—*theology of*, *for*, and *with children*—correspond to different types of competencies: children already possess foundational interpretive and existential competencies; adults aim to cultivate result-oriented competencies; and shared reflection processes develop dialogical and hermeneutical competencies. Zimmermann then reviews several influential models (Klieme, Hemel, Comenius Institute, Baden-Württemberg curricula, Schröder, the DFG Berlin project, PTI Hamburg, Dieterich) and notes their common view that theological competence involves questioning, interpreting, narrating, understanding symbols, and articulating images of God rather than reproducing doctrinal correctness. She concludes that children's theological competence is best defined not by what they "know," but by how they meaningfully engage theological questions through narration, imagination, and reflection, positioning child theology as an indispensable field bridging pedagogy, theology, and developmental theory (pp. 131–159).

In pages 165–207, Zimmermann presents a concise yet systematic overview of the methodological foundations of child theology, combining qualitative research approaches with dialogical methods derived from child philosophy. She

first outlines perception-oriented qualitative methods used to access children's theological expressions—questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, narrative and artistic artifacts—and emphasizes the importance of triangulation and detailed transcription in ensuring methodological reliability. These data are then analyzed through formalizing and interpretive qualitative techniques that reveal children's symbolic, narrative, and conceptual theological patterns. Drawing on philosophical models, especially the Socratic dialogue, Zimmermann highlights the adult's role not as an instructor but as a professionally reflective dialogue partner who opens spaces for inquiry. Building on this, she proposes child-theological didactics inspired by the "Johannine conversation," a dialogical process in which understanding unfolds gradually and misinterpretations are treated as productive steps in theological reflection rather than errors. She concludes by identifying the pedagogical conditions, attitudes, and conversation techniques required for authentic theologizing with children, showing that meaningful theological dialogue depends on openness, tolerance, and creating space for children's exploratory thinking (pp. 165–207).

Zimmermann examines the interpretation of Jesus' death as a central paradigm for child theology, arguing that the Passion narrative offers a uniquely rich field for studying how children construct theological meaning. She begins by outlining the historical, theological, developmental-psychological, and phenomenological reasons for choosing the death of Jesus as a paradigm, noting that the long-standing diversity of interpretations surrounding the crucifixion provides an ideal lens for exploring children's interpretive and theological competencies. She then analyzes the historical reconstruction of the events surrounding Jesus' death—its time, place, political context, Roman legal authority, the involvement of Jewish leadership, inconsistencies in the biblical accounts, and legal-historical questions—emphasizing that even historical reconstruction already functions as a form of theological interpretation. Zimmermann proceeds to highlight how the New Testament Passion accounts are not neutral reports but narrative constructions shaped by theological intention, symbolic richness, and literary diversity; this narrative plurality, she argues, invites children to engage naturally through retelling, reinterpreting, and forming their own narrative frameworks. She next explores metaphorical and conceptual abstractions in the theological tradition—sacrifice, ransom, reconciliation, substitution, pro-

existence, and salvation-historical models—demonstrating how these metaphors emerged as both receptive and productive interpretive processes and how their complexity shapes Christian understandings of Jesus' death. Her analysis of substitutionary models distinguishes cultic-sacrificial, forgiveness-centered, and existential-proexistential interpretations, while also addressing participatory models in which believers share in the transformative meaning of Jesus' death and the paradox of the cross as both suffering and salvation.

Building on this theological foundation, Zimmermann turns to the field of religious pedagogy, examining how the death of Jesus is treated in curricula, textbooks, and teaching materials at primary and secondary levels. She notes that curricular representations often simplify the theological depth of the Passion, whereas textbooks vary between narrative retellings and doctrinal abstractions. Zimmermann identifies three pedagogical approaches: a hermeneutical approach that centers the child's perspective, a problem-oriented approach that addresses children's existential questions about suffering, death, and injustice, and a theological approach that frames the crucifixion within the hope of the resurrection. She concludes by posing the guiding question of whether children are capable of understanding the theological dimensions of Jesus' death, ultimately arguing that children—although not yet equipped to grasp abstract doctrinal formulations—are fully capable of engaging with the existential, symbolic, relational, and narrative layers of the Passion when approached through dialogical, age-appropriate, and meaning-oriented methods. Thus, the death of Jesus becomes not an obstacle but a significant opportunity for child theology, revealing the depth and authenticity of children's theological reasoning and interpretive imagination (pp. 231–323).

Zimmermann in this final section presents an extensive empirical investigation into how children and adolescents understand and interpret the death of Jesus, using multiple studies conducted between 2004 and 2006 to explore theological competence across different age groups. She first discusses the questionnaire-based study with 10–19-year-olds, showing that while older children possess substantial factual knowledge about the Passion events, their theological interpretations vary widely, often oscillating between historical reasoning, moral explanations, and traditional doctrinal formulations. In interviews with 6–10-year-olds focused on the Gethsemane narrative, Zimmermann

finds that younger children express their interpretations primarily through metaphors, narrative reconstruction, and emotional associations, revealing early forms of theological insight even without explicit doctrinal language. A further study on children's understanding of sin (ages 7–11) establishes that concepts such as guilt, wrongdoing, responsibility, and forgiveness form the conceptual foundations necessary for grasping soteriological interpretations of Jesus' death. Zimmermann then analyzes a large-scale survey in which children respond to the question "Why is he hanging there?", showing that their answers can be categorized into several interpretive modes: narrative structuring of Jesus' life and the Passion; historical explanations involving causes, agents, and responsibility; christological and soteriological interpretations centering on Jesus' identity and salvific meaning; and relevance-oriented reflections connecting Jesus' death to contemporary moral or existential concerns. Through detailed qualitative coding and transcription analysis, she identifies distinct linguistic, narrative, historical, dogmatic, and hermeneutical competencies, demonstrating how children integrate storytelling, evidence evaluation, doctrinal intuition, and personal meaning-making. Zimmermann emphasizes that substitution ("Jesus died for us/for our sins") emerges as a dominant interpretive pattern across ages yet is articulated in diverse and often original forms. The section concludes with a close analysis of a theological dialogue with a child named Rebekka, illustrating the process competence children display during theological conversations: the ability to ask questions, negotiate meaning, revisit assumptions, and collaboratively build theological understanding. Zimmermann argues that these empirical findings confirm that children possess authentic and differentiated theological competencies, and that meaningful theological dialogue with them requires pedagogical sensitivity, open-ended questioning, and recognition of the child as a genuine theological thinker (pp. 323–392).

Zimmermann's work occupies a distinctive and influential place in the field, offering not merely new empirical insights but a comprehensive framework that integrates the historical, theoretical, methodological, and empirical dimensions of child theology. By positioning children not as passive recipients of religious instruction but as active theological subjects with their own interpretive capacity, linguistic creativity, conceptual intuition, and spiritual experience, the book marks a genuine paradigm shift within theology and

religious education. Zimmermann's combination of qualitative research strategies with dialogical methods drawn from child philosophy provides a robust methodological model for making children's theological thinking visible and academically accessible. Her extensive analysis of the death of Jesus as a theological paradigm further demonstrates how children engage meaningfully with complex doctrinal themes, establishing a solid conceptual and empirical foundation for future research. In this way, the work transforms child theology from a scattered set of practices into a coherent academic discipline, while simultaneously inviting a broader reconsideration of theology's nature, methodology, and epistemological boundaries—constituting a substantial and enduring contribution to the scholarly literature.