

Jahi McMath and the bodies of children

By [Todd M. Brenneman](#)

January 15, 2014

[Jahi McMath](#) is dead. Or, Jahi McMath is alive. Each statement is true—depending upon the person you ask. Thirteen-year-old Jahi had complications after surgery in Oakland, California. Doctors later pronounced her brain dead; there was no brain activity. Yet to her family, she remains alive. They went to court, and reached an agreement that they could keep her on a ventilator and move her out of the hospital.

In the wake of these events, theologians, doctors, ethicists, scientists and others have taken up their positions in another cultural battle. Commenters on a [CNN piece](#)—about the girl’s reported improvement after being transferred to an anonymous health care facility that was willing to care for her—sarcastically attacked the family for believing that their child could recover. Several news organizations—such as the [Los Angeles Times](#)—have reported that the family is waiting on a miracle from God to bring about healing.

Age-old discussions are resurfacing. Some are presenting the situation as science vs. religion, although this distinction is not clear. Some Catholic [ethicists](#) and [priests](#) have argued that the consensus of doctors—that there are no signs of life—should carry the day. [Others](#) have referred to the case of Terri Schiavo, a Florida woman whose case came to national attention because of the battle between her family members over her quality of life. Schiavo, however, was in a vegetative state and was not declared dead by medical personnel. Included in all of this are the philosophical and theological questions of who we are as human beings, what consciousness is and what constitutes life and death.

It is also nothing new for the bodies of children to serve as sites of political and religious conflict. Certainly, the conflict over abortion is an example of this. “It’s a Child, not a Choice,” proclaims the bumper sticker. It is a child’s body that becomes the locus of adults attempting to make sense of life and rights through political legislation and religious doctrine.

Children have often been entangled in religious and political conflict by adults. Sometimes that has taken literary form. In attempting to bring Northern compassion to the plight of enslaved African Americans, Harriet Beecher Stowe in [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*](#) (chapter 26) made the body of Little Eva part of the appeal to recognize the humanity of the slave. Stowe describes Eva's body as she gets close to death. Additionally, Eva wants to give locks of hair to the family slaves as she appeals to them and to her father to become Christians. Nineteenth-century revivalist Dwight Moody frequently described children in his sermons to make emotional appeals to his audience. It was so recurrent that they were collected into a [book](#). In several of them—if not most—the child became the spiritual guide for a transformation, as Moody attempted to Christianize a nation that was gradually moving away from and critiquing Christianity.

But the bodies of children are often secondary to greater social concerns. Religious people fear the decline of religious belief. The irreligious fear the continued presence and power of religion. In all of this collective angst, I wonder if we lose sight of the humanity of the children who are often at the center of these conflicts. Jahi McMath's family feels deeply for her. Do the pundits, theologians, ethicists—do we—really care for this child who suffered a horrible fate? Or, are we more interested in trying to judge our society and justify ourselves?

Perhaps our national discussion should not be about who has the right to determine whether someone is alive or dead, or about the nature of consciousness. Instead it should be about how we can honor this child's humanity—and that of all other children.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).