

Childhood Trauma and the Origins of Religious Myth

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In this article, I present evidence that an intimate and largely unrecognized connection exists between childhood trauma and religion. In particular, it appears that many of the world religions have been deeply shaped by historically widespread practices of childhood corporal punishment, abandonment, and neglect. These influences have long been hiding in plain sight: close to the surface yet culturally invisible. It is only recently that our understanding of the needs of children, the mechanisms of trauma, and the history of childhood has advanced to the point where the role of childhood trauma in forming religious myths could be clearly described.

Among the religions we will consider are the major monotheistic faiths—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—and those Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, that are based on teachings about karma and reincarnation. The influence of childhood trauma on these religions appears to have taken two main forms. First, the traumas shaped the religious myths during their formative periods, so that themes of child abuse, abandonment, and neglect were built into the core narratives and salvation teachings of the religions. Second, the traumas contributed to the cultural spread and persistence of the religions by helping make them emotionally resonant and cognitively believable. Although many factors affected the development and longevity of these religions, I believe that the influence of childhood trauma has been especially profound, often providing the central organizing principle of the religious myths, and functioning as a key driver of their cultural dissemination.

This article is substantial and much longer than a typical web post. But the topic is important and one cannot do justice to it in an abbreviated or superficial presentation. The best way to proceed is systematically—developing key concepts as we go. Accordingly, to lay a foundation for our discussion of current world religions, we begin by considering several ancient Greek and Roman myths.

Laying a Foundation: Ancient Myths of Abandonment

In ancient Greek and Roman culture, the abandonment of children, most typically through either exposure or sale into slavery, was common. In Athens and other Greek cities, unwanted infants were placed into terracotta pots or other containers and left outside the city, where they were

likely to die from starvation or attack by wild animals. Infants were especially likely to be abandoned if they were deformed, illegitimate, or if the parents (or a single parent, following the death of a spouse) were impoverished; but healthy, legitimate children of non-impoverished couples were sometimes abandoned as well. Girls may have been at special risk; for example, during the Hellenistic period, the Athenian poet Posidippus wrote, “Anyone, even if he is poor, brings up a son; even if he is rich, he exposes a daughter.” [1]

For the Roman period, evidence of widespread abandonment is extensive. Tacitus considered Jews eccentric because they reared all children they gave birth to. The physician Soranus provided guidelines for “recognizing the newborn that is worth rearing,” as if rearing were the exception [2]—and the Stoic philosopher Hieroclese wrote that the majority of parents abandoned one or more children. The late Yale historian John Boswell, a pioneer in the study of Roman and medieval child abandonment, estimated that, of all children born in Rome during the first three centuries of the Christian era, 20 to 40 percent were abandoned. [3]

Most of these abandoned children died. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian believed it “rare that exposed children survive,” with hypothermia and starvation being the most common outcomes. [4] The theologian Tertullian suggested that death frequently resulted from attack by scavenging wild animals. He wrote with sarcasm of the mythical Saturn’s decision to eat his children: “[B]etter he than wolves, if he had exposed them.” [5] Although some exposed children were rescued from immediate death, most of these were brutally exploited. Many were raised as slaves; in fact, some scholars believe that the majority of Italian-born slaves in the Roman Empire derived from this source. Other rescued children were reared as child prostitutes, gladiators, beggars (sometimes being maimed to increase profits), and castrated as eunuchs. [6]

These widespread practices of abandonment are reflected in many ancient myths. Historian Boswell summarizes as follows:

Oedipus was found by a shepherd and reared by a childless king.... The eponymous founder of the Ionians, Ion, was abandoned by his mother.... Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire, had been abandoned and brought up by a herdsman and his wife, according to Herodotus; as had Paris, who began the Trojan War, which ultimately led to the founding of the dynasty overthrown by [the abandoned and rescued twins] Romulus and Remus. Telephus, a king of Mysia in Greece, and Habis, a ruler of the Cunetes in Spain, had both been exposed as children, according to tradition. Jupiter himself had been abandoned as a child, and his twin sons, Zethus and Amphion, were exposed, as were Poseidon, Aesculapius, Hephaistos, Attis, and the goddess Cybele. [7]

These myths reflected a pervasive social reality. They likely emerged in multiple forms and became culturally pervasive because they resonated with actual, lived experience. Many of these myths end happily, with the children being reunited with their biological parents and going on to great things, most typically kingship. This “happy ending,” of course, was much different from the outcomes experienced in reality by most abandoned children. Perhaps one can see in these

happy, or ameliorated, endings a form of cultural wish fulfillment, a way to make bearable a terrible reality by holding in mind the image of a glorious outcome.

The narrative inversions required for these happy endings are sometimes remarkable for their idiosyncratic features. For example, the abandoned children Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of ancient Rome, were said to have been suckled by a wolf—the very animal that Tertullian says was most likely to kill and eat abandoned babies. Here we see not only a generic and formulaic happy ending, involving the rescue and ascension to kingship of the abandoned children, but a complete inversion of the context-specific risks that the abandoned child faced: the animal that, in reality, posed a great threat of death is mythically rendered as protector and nurturer. [8]

Myths about abandoned children, with ameliorated endings, extend back toward the beginning of recorded history. For example, King Sargon the Great of Akkad, who ruled in the 23rd century BCE, was abandoned as an infant in the river Euphrates, according to myth. Unlike the apparently more typical historical experience of children, which likely involved deliberate infanticide by drowning [9], it is said that Sargon was placed into a reed basket that was carefully waterproofed with pitch, from which he was subsequently rescued and declared king. Moses, too, of course, was said to have been rescued from a river, in his case the Nile. Having been placed into a pitch-covered basket, Moses was not only rescued but also was nursed by his own mother. In fact, according to this myth, Moses was not even abandoned in the usual sense but was placed among the reeds, out of love, to protect him from an infanticidal Pharaonic decree. Here the narrative amelioration takes the form of not only a happy ending but a happy beginning as well. The myth of Moses, like that of Sargon, follows the typical pattern: the infant is rescued, ascends to power, and goes on to lead a great nation. In his commentary on the biblical book of Exodus, historian and biblical scholar William H. C. Propp writes about the psychological resonance of these stories:

The abandonment of children is probably universal.... Mesopotamian texts, our oldest sources, refer to real or symbolic abandonment.... In societies practicing exposure... childhood fears of abandonment, and suspicions (or hopes) of being a foundling, would be widespread. Tales of adoption would be particularly fascinating. Listeners would identify with the endangered infant, who embodies their primal fears and fantasies.... We must leave open the question of whether the Moses story depends directly upon an Assyrian, Egyptian or Hittite prototype.... But whether Israel inherited the Floating Foundling Tale or created it anew, its truth must be sought within the human psyche.... [10]

Starting to Think About World Religions: *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, a Greek polytheistic mythic text probably composed in the seventh century BCE, provided the narrative basis for the Eleusinian mystery religion and the

popular Thesmophoria festival. In its cultural persistence, popularity, and geographic spread, the Eleusinian mystery religion—which was influential for over a thousand years and in many lands—has much in common with the world religions of today. For this reason, discussing the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* lets us further develop the ideas presented so far, and to do so in a way leads naturally into our exploration of currently extant religions.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* tells the story of the young girl Persephone's abduction by Hades, god of the underworld [11], and the search for Persephone by her mother, Demeter. According to the *Hymn*, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter and Zeus, the Father god ("Zeus Pater"), is playing in a field with her friends when the earth yawns open and Hades emerges in his chariot. Acting on a plan hatched with his brother Zeus, Hades captures Persephone in his chariot and carries her, screaming, into the underworld. Hades gives Persephone pomegranate seeds to eat; according to the myth, eating the seeds binds Persephone to the underworld, making her a lifetime captive and consort to Hades. Persephone and Demeter, the separated daughter and mother, pine terribly for each other.

When one compares this myth to the actual experiences of girls in ancient Greece, remarkable parallels are evident. In ancient Greece, typically at around age 14, a girl was placed into a marriage arranged by her father. The husband commonly was twice the girl's age and was, in fact, often the father's brother. [12] During the marriage ceremony, the girl was taken by her new husband, via cart or chariot, to his home. This transfer effected a precipitous and permanent change of residence for the girl; never again would she live with her parents. On the wedding night, the virginal girl ate fruit offered by the husband and was expected to have intercourse. It appears that force could be involved in the sexual consummation; one source suggests that the bride spent part of the wedding night "screaming." [13]

After her relocation to the husband's home, the girl was largely restricted to the house. The home was considered the proper domain of women, and it was thought unfitting for them to venture outside except for religious purposes, such as festivals and burials. Within the home, women were further sequestered in the "women's quarters," located in the most remote and protected part of the house. When Plato describes women as a race "accustomed to a submerged and shadowy existence" (Laws 781c), he is referring to this lifelong sequestration. In most cases, the localization of mother and daughter to their respective homes meant that, starting immediately with the daughter's marriage, the two had little or no contact except at public ritual events. [14]

We see in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* a surprisingly transparent reflection of the actual situation of Greek girls. The pattern of de facto marital abduction, enacted by the father in collaboration with (often) his brother; the experience of the wedding night; and the subsequent confinement of the wife to the "shadowy" recesses of the husband's home—these are mythically represented as abduction, imprisonment, and marriage in Hades. The permanent separation of daughter and mother are reflected in the mutual pining of Persephone and Demeter. Given the element of force that may have been involved during the wedding night, and the possibility that the bride spent part of the night crying out, it is striking that the *Hymn* describes Persephone as

screaming during her abduction by Hades. Such overlaps between the *Hymn* and the marital reality of Greek girls have been well recognized by scholars. [15]

As in the ancient myths of abandonment, the story of Persephone's abduction and imprisonment embeds a happy ending: by withholding the harvest, Demeter forces Zeus to arrange for Persephone to spend most of the year visiting her birth home. Ultimately, Persephone spends just one third of each year in Hades. This plot element has no correspondence to external reality, for in ancient Greece the mother was powerless to mitigate the marital transfer and permanent sequestration of the daughter—or, for that matter, her own sequestration. [16] As in the ancient abandonment myths, The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* at once reflects and imaginatively ameliorates the painful realities of childhood.

Christianity and the New Testament

Although patriarchy has been the dominant form of social organization in many cultures, patriarchy in the ancient Roman world, which provided the most immediate setting for the writing of the New Testament [17], was exceptionally explicit and well defined, forming a central element of Roman law, ethics, and self-perception. We can gain insight into how this patriarchal context impacted children by considering two contemporary sources on the Roman laws of *patria potestas* (“fatherly powers”). Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek teacher of rhetoric who lived in Rome from 30 BCE to 8 BCE, wrote:

[T]he founder of the Roman constitution gave the father unrestricted power over his sons. That power was to remain until the father's death. He might imprison or beat him, chain him up and send him to work in the country, or even execute him. [18]

Gaius, in his influential second-century CE textbook of Roman law, indicates that the same laws applied to both slaves and children:

Some persons are legally independent, some are subject to another. [O]f those subject to another, some are in *potestas* [power].... Slaves are in *potestas* of their masters. This *potestas* rests on universal law, for it is observable that among all peoples alike, masters have power of life and death over their slaves.... Also in our *potestas* are any of our children who are the offspring of a lawful marriage. This right is peculiar to Roman citizens, for there are virtually no other peoples who have such power over their children as we have.... [19]

These two quotations are of special significance to us because they chronologically bracket the roughly 100-year period (ca. 50 CE to 150 CE) when virtually all the books of the New Testament were written.

While the execution of children by fathers was probably extremely rare, harsh corporal discipline of children, especially sons, was common in the Roman world and is attested by numerous

sources. A few examples follow, arranged in rough chronological order, starting in the century before the birth of Christianity. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1st century BCE) advocates that parents and teachers “chastise the young with special severity” to shape them for a virtuous life [20]. Cicero (106-43 BCE) indicates that boys could be beaten by fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and teachers [21]. Seneca (3 BCE-65 CE) explains that children are beaten for the same reason that animals are, “so that the pain overcomes their obstinacy” [22]. Seneca also describes how the father’s role was primarily disciplinary, in contrast to maternal nurturance [23]. Quintilian (35-95 CE) indicates that during beatings Imperial Roman children often became so terrified that they lost bowel or bladder control. “When children are beaten,” he writes, “the pain and fear often have results which it is not pleasant to speak of and which will later be a source of embarrassment” [24]. The medical authority Galen (130-200 CE) indicates that corporal discipline could begin in infancy: once children reach about one year of age, they “can be made to obey by the use of blows, threats, reprimands, and admonishments” [25]. The New Testament itself asserts that corporal punishment by fathers was actually universal, at least among legitimate male children. The book of Hebrews, written around 65 CE and reflecting Roman cultural norms, states flatly that “all” sons are punished and then asks, “For what son is he whom the father does not chastise?”—and answers: “If you are without chastisement...then are you bastards and not sons” [Hebrews 12:7-8]. Similar norms existed among Jews, where the well-known pro-punishment admonitions of Hebrew wisdom literature, in particular Proverbs and Sirach, were almost certainly operative. Further, statements by Philo and Josephus, the two most important first-century CE Jewish sources, raise the possibility that a biblical law which made persistent disobedience against parents a capital crime may have been operative during the formative period of Christianity [26].

Holding in mind these endemic patterns of childhood corporal punishment, especially that inflicted by father on son to enforce obedience—the stereotypical pattern—let us consider the writings of the New Testament, looking both at the New Testament’s core theological narrative and its primary salvation teaching.

A central theme of the New Testament’s theological narrative is that the Son, Jesus, suffers corporally according to the will of his (heavenly) Father. According to Paul, the Father “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” [Romans 8:32]. In John’s Gospel, Jesus rebukes Peter when he tries to prevent Jesus’ capture by the Romans: “the cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?” [18:11] The cup, of course, represents the suffering that Jesus knows awaits him. In John’s Gospel, the Father, speaking in “a voice from heaven,” indicates his direct role in the crucifixion [12:27-28]. The Acts of the Apostles states that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” [Acts 2:23]. In fact, Acts explicitly says that all human participants in the crucifixion were merely intermediaries who “were gathered together” by the Father to carry out His plan [Acts 4:27-28]. In describing the heavenly Father as the source of his Son’s suffering, the New Testament closely parallels the actual historical situation of ordinary children, especially sons, in the patriarchal and punitive world of ancient Rome.

The New Testament narrative also reflects the inner psychological reality of the child. At Gethsemane, Jesus grapples with thoughts of his impending Passion. In the Gospels of Matthew [26:38] and Mark [14:34], Jesus is “very sorrowful, even to [the point of] death.” In Luke’s Gospel [22:44], Jesus is in emotional “agony.” In the book of Hebrews [5:7], Jesus emits “loud cries and tears.” Responding to these intense inner states of devastation and desolation, Jesus begs his Father not to proceed: “Father, all things are possible for you; remove this cup from before me” [Mark 14:35-36; Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42]. These portrayals of the Son parallel the emotional agony and desperate pleading of ordinary children when faced with corporal punishment. In the end, Jesus resigns himself to his fate, saying, “Father...not what I will, but what you will” [Mark 14:36; Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42]—a posture of filial submission like that forced upon corporally punished children since time immemorial. Thus, in the image of Jesus, we encounter an almost perfectly formed representation of the external circumstances, feeling states, behavioral reactions and, ultimately, volitional collapse of the corporally punished child.

When a child is reared with corporal punishment, fear is a prominent feature of his or her reality. It is thus not surprising to find images of fear strongly reflected in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke [12:4-5], Jesus says of the Father: “I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!” The letter to the Ephesians [2:2-3] makes clear that the Father’s wrath arises in response to the disobedience of his human children. In the very first lines of the earliest known Christian text, Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, ca. 50 CE, we read of the central role of fear in early conversions to Christianity: the Thessalonians turned from idols to God and waited for “Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” [1 Thess. 1:9-10]. Almost three and a half centuries later, Augustine asserts: “Very rarely, no never, does it happen that someone comes to us with the wish to be Christian who has not been struck by some fear of God” [27]. These extraordinary statements provide deep insight into the psychological world within which Christianity first spread—a world that appears to have been pervaded by fear of the father.

Remarkable parallels with ordinary childhood are present not only in Christianity’s core theological narrative but also in its most explicit teaching on human salvation. When children are punished, the proximate cause may be quite varied, depending on the particular circumstance and the nature of the parental demand that has been violated. But the ultimate cause is general and homogeneous: the child is punished for disobedience. Disobedience is the quintessential “crime” of childhood. Conversely, the essential and required route for avoiding punishment, and for obviating the escalation of punishment once punishment has begun, is obedience. Notice that if a child is punished because of disobedience, and punishment is obviated because of obedience, the child is effectively *saved from punishment by obedience*. The theological parallels are obvious. Within the Christian salvational system, disobedience—Adam’s sin in the Biblical garden—leads to Paternal punishment for humans; whereas obedience to the Father—the behavioral and attitudinal stance of Jesus—leads to salvation. These teachings are expressed most clearly in Paul’s letter to the Romans, which became foundational for Christianity:

Then as one man’s [Adam’s] trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s [Jesus’] act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man’s

disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. [Romans 5:18-19]

Thus, for both the child within the family and the believer within the Pauline framework, punishment occurs in response to disobedience, and salvation is attained through filial obedience. It is important to notice that, within the Christian framework, human beings are themselves considered to be children of the heavenly Father. Thus, in both ordinary childhood and Christian teachings about damnation, it is *children* who are subject to punishment by the father/Father. The parallelism between ordinary childhood and New Testament teachings is found deeper still when one notes that Adam himself is understood to be “the Son of God” [Luke 3:38] and, as many commentators have observed, his sin has a distinctly child-like quality to it. [28] Thus, the clear connotation of the biblical text is that Adam's sin is a specifically filial disobedience. Understood on its own terms, the central function of Christianity as a salvation religion is to provide a metaphysically constructed process by which the believer replaces filial disobedience (identification with Adam) with filial obedience (identification with Jesus). This objective is epitomized in the phrase: “to die to the self and be reborn in Christ”—which means: to die to the innately disobedient self, which is identified with Adam, and to be reborn in the preternaturally obedient Child, Jesus.

These same concepts are evident in the Christian sacramental structure, which embodies and gives behavioral expression to the underlying salvation myth. The concepts are especially obvious within the context of the New Testament's theology of baptism, in particular that presented in the letters of Paul and his followers. In these teachings, immersion in the baptismal waters is understood as effecting the death of the old, willfully disobedient self, which is identified with Adam [e.g., Romans 6:3-4]—and emersion from the water is understood as effecting the believer's rebirth with, or in, the fully obedient Christ-Child (e.g., Colossians, Ephesians). In fact, this sequence of ritually constructed death (of the willful self) and birth (of the new, obedient, Christ-like self) is often understood as being mystically tied directly to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus: the disobedient self is said to be crucified with or through Jesus, just as the new self is resurrected with or through him. Here it should be pointed out that in attempting to sacramentally effect a change of identification from disobedient Adam to obedient Jesus, the individual is, without conscious awareness, undertaking *voluntarily*, on the level of symbolic myth, the very process of inner transformation that the child, under threat of punishment, was *forced* to enact during childhood. For the individual who was subject to the coercive suppression of the will during childhood, this sacramental process, in its self-directed and self-empowered retracing of a prior victimization, shows remarkable parallels with the phenomenon of post-traumatic behavioral repetition.

Many of these same ideas apply also to abandonment. Earlier in this article, we considered a set of Greco-Roman myths that expressed the reality of child abandonment. The Gospel story is part of this same narrative tradition. According to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus experienced himself as abandoned by his Father, crying out from the cross, “Why have you abandoned me?” [Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34] This so-called Cry of Dereliction has its source in the twenty-second Psalm of the Hebrew Scriptures (a.k.a. Old Testament)—but in the Gospels the

words are given a new context and radically transformed in meaning. No longer expressing an ordinary Hebrew's generic lament to God, the words are placed in the mouth of a Son who is speaking directly to his Father. These words now express a specific kind of inconsolable pain, forming an utterance we might expect of the countless ordinary children abandoned or neglected by *their* fathers. Thus, in its portrayals of both corporal pain and abandonment, we find in the Passion of Jesus remarkable parallels with the "passion" of ordinary children.

But the story of Jesus' abandonment does not end there—for like those children in Greco-Roman myths who are ultimately reclaimed by their parents and go on to kingship, Jesus is resurrected by his Father, ascends to his side [e.g. John 20:17], and is exalted as the head of a great people. Like its ancient predecessors, this portrayal likely provided a mythic compensation, distraction, defense, and palliation for the grim realities of child abandonment. In fact, with the spread of Christianity in late antiquity, the story of Jesus largely displaced many of the earlier, disparate abandonment myths. It thus provided a unifying symbolic vehicle through which a psychological preoccupation with abandonment was expressed in the medieval and modern periods.

Broadly stated, we have been considering a process by which religious myths, including both narrative and salvational myths, engage individual minds and the culture at large by evoking powerful childhood emotions and a shared sense of ultimate truth in response to endemic childhood traumas. Basic features of this process were recognized almost three centuries ago by Susannah Wesley—a devout Christian and the mother of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Christian Methodism. In a letter of 1732, Susannah explained her views on corporal punishment:

I insist on conquering the will of children betimes [i.e., early in life], because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education, without which both precept and example will be ineffectual.... This is still more evident if we further consider that religion is nothing else than the doing the will of God, and not our own....[29]

In this extraordinary passage, Wesley posits that the enforced submission experienced by the corporally punished child lays a necessary psychological and cognitive foundation for the later development of a belief system centered on submission to God. Wesley lived in a world very different from our own, and her ideas reflect a staunch advocacy of physical punishment. Yet her fundamental insights are profound and almost entirely consistent with the ideas we are considering here.

In the history of Western culture, childhood corporal punishment has consistently been viewed as both necessary and beneficial. Furthermore, the potential for psychological harm, even in the context of severe and potentially life-threatening physical punishment, has been at most dimly and inconsistently perceived. In this cultural context, it was not possible to grasp consciously or communicate literally about one's subjective experiences of trauma because the necessary foundation of understanding was lacking. However, a symbolic "language," such as that provided by Christianity, could fill the gap—making it possible to express, however indirectly, the experience of endemic childhood suffering and its persistent effects in adults. At the same

time, the ameliorative Easter myth of resurrection—the redemptive vision of a loving, non-punitive, and endlessly enduring Child-Parent reunion—would readily have functioned as a powerfully attractive balm for the often-unmitigated terrors, longings, and permanent tragedies of childhood. This explanation, though simple in its essential features, goes far in explaining not only the original development of the Christian myth but also the underlying motivation of the entire Christian religious endeavor for the past two millennia.

In arguing that seminal New Testament narratives and salvation teachings can be explained with reference to childhood experience, I am not asserting that these teachings arose through a psychological creation *ex nihilo*. Rather, they appear to have arisen largely through the modification, combination, and recontextualization of preexisting religious and cultural elements. We have already seen this process at work in the Cry of Dereliction, in which words from the twenty-second Psalm from the Hebrew Scriptures were recontextualized, making them directly relevant to the experiences of children. Another example is found in Isaiah’s image of a suffering servant [e.g., Isaiah 53], which many scholars believe provided a literary model for New Testament images of Jesus. In Isaiah, the servant is an ill-defined righteous innocent who suffers according to the will of God. But in the New Testament, the servant becomes a Son who suffers according to the will of his Father, more accurately reflecting the experiences of children. Many similar examples could be offered. We thus can say that a pattern of widespread childhood trauma within a culture can act as an organizing principle in the formation of a religious myth: like the dreaming mind, which can generate meaningful narrative collages from mnemonic fragments of waking experience, the mythmaking process can construct thematically precise, emotionally resonant narratives from the materials at hand.

The Hebrew Scriptures and Quran— and Abrahamic Religion in General

As we have seen, in Christianity—as in childhood—disobedience (the sin of Adam) leads to punishment; and obedience (the attitudinal and behavioral stance of Jesus) leads to salvation. Other embodiments of this general pattern are central to Judaism, the quintessential religion of divine commands, and Islam, the very name of which literally means “submission” to the will of God. We thus observe a consistent overlap with childhood themes in the salvational structures of the three main Abrahamic religions: just as the child must submit his or her will to, and obey, the seemingly omnipotent parent, so human beings must submit their will to, and obey, the omnipotent God. The child who does not submit to the parents, especially the father, will suffer punishment and the withdrawal of love, support, and protection; the religionist who does not submit to God can expect essentially the same devastating outcome—i.e., divine punishment and loss of divine love. In contrast, the child who submits and subordinates his will to the parent, especially the father, is effectively “saved” from these outcomes—as is the religionist who submits to God. [30]

In contradistinction to Christianity, in which obedience is attained primarily *metaphysically*, through belief in, and union with, an exemplar of absolute filial obedience (i.e., Christ),

obedience in Judaism and Islam is attained largely *behaviorally*, through following the dictates of God’s revealed instructions as contained in the Hebrew Scriptures and Quran and their associated legal traditions. Though disobedience leads to punishment in all three Abrahamic faiths, the form of that punishment varies somewhat. In Christianity and Islam, punishment is largely individual and takes the form of damnation to hell. In Judaism, by contrast, especially in its prototypical (biblical) forms, punishment was understood to be largely collective—for example, the devastation of Jerusalem and the expulsion of the “children of Israel” from the Land—though individual punishment has played a role as well. These differences in the means of attaining obedience, and in the specific forms of punishment, represent variations on a common punitive theme.

As was the case for Christianity, the underlying salvation myths of the Hebrew Scriptures and Quran are consistent with patterns of childrearing in the cultures where these texts developed. I have already referred to corporal punishment during formative periods of Judaism—for instance, as prescribed in Proverbs and Sirach. In addition, laws in Exodus [21:15, 17], Leviticus [20:9], and Deuteronomy [21:18-21] likely portray cultural norms in which a variety of offenses against parents, including persistent disobedience, were punishable by death. Regarding Islam, there is substantial evidence that traditional Arab childrearing practices have been extremely harsh and authoritarian, including, in some Bedouin groups, a well-established pattern in which the father threatens or actually cuts or stabs a disobedient child with a saber or dagger. Of traditional Arab childrearing norms, one scholar has written, “the entire system is calculated to subordinate son to father.... there is an almost total concentration of power in the hands of the father over both his sons and daughters.” [31] Consistent with the pattern we observed for the New Testament, the salvation myths that lie at the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures and Quran closely track, and appear to have been fundamentally shaped by, the historical experiences of children. Likewise, the presence of trauma-related salvation themes in these religions goes far in explaining the emotional power and the perception of transcendent and ineffable Truth experienced by subsequent generations reared in those traditions.

I mentioned previously that the opening lines of the earliest surviving Christian document, Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, emphasize the centrality of God’s anger to theology, conversion, and belief. Likewise, the very first lines of the Quran, which are repeated in countless settings by Muslims, portray God as prone to wrath. In those lines, believers implore God to keep them from acting in ways that could lead to punishment: “Keep us on the right path. The path of those upon whom Thou has bestowed favors. Not [the path] of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down...” [1.1-1.6]. This is the central message of the Quran’s first chapter, and it thematically frames the entire Quran. It is within this context that the Quran’s oft-repeated insistence on God’s mercy must be understood. God is merciful in the specific sense that he provides believers the means—Koranic instruction—to know his Will. If the believer succeeds in conforming adequately to that Will, punishment can be avoided, should God so wish. This is essentially the same concept of divine anger and mercy found in the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures, in that believers can avoid God’s wrath through, respectively, belief in Jesus and adherence to the Mosaic commands. This is also the kind of wrath and mercy that has been shown to children by their fathers, and sometimes their mothers as well, in most cultures for most of history: the father

is inclined to wrath and may punish with summary brutality, yet he is merciful in the specific sense that he usually does not punish, and may act lovingly, when the child obeys his will.

Not only in the salvation teachings of the Abrahamic religions, but in the narrative myths as well, one finds reflections of the fears, losses, and pains of childhood. We previously considered the myth of Moses' quasi-exposure and rescue. The biblical story of Abraham's sons, Ishmael and Isaac, likewise expresses ameliorated reflections of devastating childhood experiences. Ishmael is abandoned twice—first by Abraham, his father, then by Hagar, his mother—yet survives to become the source of a great nation. In the story of Isaac, the son is turned into a sacrificial victim, according to the will of his father, who himself is obediently following the command of *his* God and heavenly Father. In conformity with a now-familiar pattern, Isaac, like Ishmael, is miraculously saved.

A number of scholars have suggested that the Isaac myth may reflect actual historical practices of child sacrifice in ancient Israel. In fact, the biblical text itself embeds hints that in the original version of the story Isaac may actually have been sacrificed. [32] Here I wish to focus on a less literal possibility. For most of history, abandonment and corporal punishment have been stereotypical traumas of childhood. Given this history, it is remarkable that the two sons of Abraham are portrayed in the Bible as having been victimized corporally (Isaac) and abandoned (Ishmael) by their own father [33]. Further, the cultural persistence of these Abrahamic stories likely provides insight into the emotional and cognitive resonances of generations of believers. In this regard, it is noteworthy that most Muslims believe it was Ishmael, not Isaac, whom Abraham attempted to sacrifice. Perhaps we can see in this understanding of the myth an unconscious attempt to express a cultural legacy of both childhood abandonment and corporal assault; in fact, given the traditional Bedouin pattern referred to a few paragraphs earlier, the myth of a son's near sacrifice by his knife-wielding father may have had—and in some settings may still have—a very specific cultural resonance. This dual legacy, in any case, became central to the Christian tradition, with Jesus, during the crucifixion, suffering both corporal assault and abandonment according to the will of his heavenly Father. As discussed previously, Jesus was miraculously redeemed by this same Father through resurrection and ascension: a supernatural variant of a time-honored happy ending.

Great emphasis has traditionally been placed on the obedience of Abraham—hence “Abrahamic religion”—while the response of Isaac (or Ishmael) to his intended sacrifice has been at most of secondary interest. Yet the child is our main concern, so we consider his portrayal in the texts. In the Hebrew Scriptures, no words are attributed to Isaac during his binding [Genesis 22:9]; it is unclear whether his silence represents unquestioning obedience, mute horror, or a deliberate textual omission. In the Quran, the sacrificial son is engaged and affirmatively submissive: “My father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if it pleases God, steadfast in my faith.” [Surah 37:103]—and both Abraham and his son are credited with submission to God. In the New Testament, Isaac is hardly mentioned outside of genealogical listings, yet from the early Church Fathers onward Isaac has been understood as a prototype of Jesus, with his near-sacrifice foreshadowing the perfected (and completed) Paternal sacrifice of Jesus. As we have seen, after

begging his heavenly Father to remove the cup of pain from before him, this (so to speak) “second Isaac” accedes to his Father’s plan: “not what I will, but what you will.”

In the Quran and New Testament—and possibly the Hebrew Scriptures as well—the sacrificial son evinces what Paul terms “obedience unto death” [Philippians 2:8]: a willingness even to die if obedience requires it. These portrayals can be understood as idealized images of the volitional collapse of the corporally punished child. But more than this, these are also images of the abused child as a self-empowered agent, especially in the Koranic portrayal. Even more impressive in this regard is the portrayal in John’s Gospel, where a seemingly omnipotent Jesus, making no mention of his Father’s having sent him to suffer and die [John 3:16], asserts that he has unilateral control over his fate: “I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again.” [John 10:17-18]. When one considers a human child’s actual responses to severe physical punishment—abject terror, traumatic dissociation and disorganization, a loss of physiologic self-regulation—a psychological function of these canonical portrayals suggests itself. Because almost all children, until the most recent historical moment, were beaten, typically starting at a young age, virtually all religious believers experienced early trauma at the hands of their fathers. By engaging emotionally and cognitively with these fantastic and grandiose canonical portrayals of the abused child as self-empowered agent, the traumatized believer can preempt intolerable recollections of overwhelming fear and helplessness. In their mythic undoing and reversal of the helpless victimization of the child, these portrayals have much in common with a what the traumatologist Lenore Terr, M.D. has called a “post-traumatic compensatory fantasy.” [34]

Considering the Abrahamic religions as a group, we see that the salvation teachings and mythic narratives overlap thematically with historically widespread patterns of child abuse and trauma. In the Hebrew Scriptures and Quran, these overlaps are not as precise or ramified as they are in the New Testament—where the explicit focus on Father and Son renders the connection with childhood especially transparent. Nonetheless, childhood themes in Judaism and Islam are substantial, suggesting that childhood experiences shaped the foundational teachings of all three major Abrahamic religions. Given the sequence in which these religions developed historically, it is reasonable to suggest that Israelite religion expressed an initial, monotheistic (or proto-monotheistic) embodiment of childhood fear and longing, and that Christianity and Islam later emerged as culturally modified expressions of fundamentally similar childhood realities.

Karmic Reincarnation: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Related Traditions

In the examples we have considered so far, patterns of trauma in the family have been translated into religious myth in rather direct ways. In some of these myths, we see fathers, mothers, sons, or daughters portrayed in divinized form and, to a greater or lesser degree, playing their familiar roles. However, such direct expressions about childhood do not exhaust the range of possibilities. The symbolizing capacity of the human mind, which is evident in dreams and figures of speech, can portray life themes and experiences with varying degrees of concreteness and abstractness,

literalness and figurativeness. For this reason, childhood influences may be present even when the mythic translation is far from transparent—even, for example, in metaphysical teachings that do not portray anthropomorphic gods or divine agents of any sort. Such, I believe, is the case for religious teachings about karma and reincarnation, to which we now turn. To help explain my thinking on this subject, I begin with a few words about how the child responds internally, on a psychological level, to physical punishment.

When corporal punishment is used to inculcate obedience, the child internalizes two key lessons, or sets of associations, which are really two sides of the same coin: first, that disobedience causes pain, terror, and loss of love or affection; second, that obedience obviates, prevents, or minimizes these undesirable outcomes. As we have seen, these internalized lessons form the psychological foundation of the primary salvation teaching of the New Testament and, quite likely, of the Hebrew Scriptures and Quran as well. Closely related to these twin lessons, when corporal punishment is applied starting early in life, a profound change can occur within the child's mind. This change is classically discussed with references to subduing, taming, or breaking the child's will. This inner change consists in the child's de-privileging, renouncing, and ultimately losing awareness of his or her own desires and will. In fact, in traditional advice literature about childrearing, the real enemy has long been recognized to be not disobedience per se (which can occur, for instance, because the child misunderstands the parent's demands or lacks the physical capacity to carry them out) but, rather, *willful* disobedience or even, simply, *willfulness*: the child's inner conviction that it is proper to value, privilege, and act on his or her desires and will, even when doing so conflicts with the will of the parent. Willfulness is itself closely tied to the child's sense of self—for only when the self is felt to be significant and valuable are the desires viewed as worthy of fulfilling and the will worthy of acting on.

Let us apply these ideas to religion. In discussing Christianity, we saw that the phrase “to die to the self and be reborn in Christ” refers to an inner process through which the believer attempts to eradicate the willful and disobedient self—the self that is identified with Adam—and to replace it with a new, fully obedient self, which is identified with Jesus and his absolute obedience to his Father. This religiously constructed death and rebirth, I suggested, arose as a mythic portrayal and repetition of the experience of ordinary children who are inculcated with obedience by corporal punishment. In effect, the individual who, as a child, learns to achieve “salvation” within the human family by renouncing and negating the willful self, later projects, or maps, that same saving strategy, writ large, onto a religiously imagined cosmos.

Within Indian religious teachings about karma and reincarnation, we likewise find the prescription to negate the will and desires, and the actions and self that are identified with them, as a way to avoid suffering. Such teachings lie at the heart of Hinduism, Buddhism, and related traditions; in fact, it is sometimes asserted that the concept of karmic reincarnation forms the essential “creed” of these religious systems [35]. According to karmic teachings, individual desire and will, and the self-serving actions that arise from them, drive the cycle of rebirths. This reincarnative cycle, which persists endlessly unless interrupted, results in and is mythically construed as suffering. This suffering is posited to arise both during life on earth and in the torturous, purgatorial hells that lie between earthly incarnations—a system that has been

described as “double retribution.” [36] Karma functions in this system by bringing about the cycle of rebirths. Specifically, individual desire and will, and the actions associated with them, lead to the accumulation of karma; this accumulated karma drives the reincarnative cycle and the retribution this cycle entails. [37]

It is noteworthy that the purgatorial hells which form a central part of karmically understood suffering are often portrayed in ways quite close to those found in Western concepts of hell. One scholar of Buddhism writes:

Often, Buddhist scriptures use very graphic, indeed gruesome, language to describe the plethora of torments that await the wicked in hell.... Here is a brief account of some of these torments from the Pali canon: First, the wardens of hell drive red-hot iron stakes through the victim’s hands, feet, and chest to prevent him from struggling. Then, using sharp razors, they will shave off his flesh, head downwards.... Then he will be forced to climb up and down a fiery mountain of red-hot embers. From here, he is taken into a huge boiler full of melted copper, where he is thoroughly boiled and hurled into the Great Hell where he remains in flames for a long time.... [38]

Similar teachings about hell are found in Hinduism. [39]

Thus, within the framework of a traditional karmic understanding, suffering refers not merely to the discomfort or pain, whether emotional or physical, that many of us experience as an unfortunate part of ordinary life. Rather, karmic suffering entails and is rooted in a mythically constructed retributive world-view that is fundamentally similar to Western conceptions of divine punishment in hell. To understand this point, we must draw a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the undeniable reality of this-worldly experiences of pain and, on the other hand, what appears to be a frankly psychological *projection*, onto a metaphysically imagined cosmos, of traumatically dissociated anguish arising from child abuse and trauma. It is this latter projective process, I suggest, that lies at the root of virtually all conceptions of metaphysically mediated suffering, Western and Eastern, especially traditional conceptions of hell.

Notice that in both Christian and karmic conceptions, it is primarily the *will*—and all the psychological features associated with it (desire, willful action, the willing self)—that brings about suffering. That is, the very same will which, from time immemorial, has been brutally suppressed in childhood—the will that has been the primary cause of emotional and physical pain in children—is said also, within the religious framework, to be the primary cause of suffering, punishment, and retribution in the cosmos. It seems unlikely that this overlap between childhood and religious metaphysics is mere coincidence. Rather, the notion that will is the mediator and cause of suffering appears to be rooted in the abuse and trauma experienced by children. Put differently, a retributive schema inculcated in childhood, one that links will to the most intense kinds of suffering, has been mapped onto the religiously imagined cosmos. [40]

In this context, it is useful to note that the many forms of karmic teaching are actually small variations on a common volitional theme. As examples, consider the following explanations from

a scholar of karmic religion: Buddhist teachings define “the [karmic] act as rooted in, or even as essentially identical with, volition...” The early Buddhist Sautranitka school teaches that “any intentional act...initiates...a process of... transformation... which will lead to...retribution.” The Madhyamika school of Buddhism holds that “Karma is inseparable from...selfhood.” Within Hinduism, the system of Patanjali Yoga posits that desire (and aversion, which is the negative expression of volitional desire) is the fundamental “affliction” on which the karmic system depends. Of Jainism, which conceives of karma as a kind of material substance: “A soul defiled by... passion and selfish desire attracts particles of potentially karmic matter...and through the ‘vibrations’ produced by volitional activities, it binds or glues these particles to itself and converts them to actual karma.” [41]

Thus, as with the image of hell itself, I suggest, the overall structure of karmic thought arose largely as a psychological projection of actual childhood circumstance: a cultural norm of trauma through which children have learned that the will and all associated with it—including the container of volitional desire that we call the self—leads to unendurable pain. In this context, perhaps it is not surprising that the individual self would be viewed as illusory, as it is in both Hinduism and Buddhism, for if the will is broken and lost to conscious awareness, the child becomes an automaton, blindly following the will of another, and the self becomes an empty shell. From there, it is only one small step, psychologically speaking, to conclude—to *feel*—that the self does not really exist at all. Thus, for one who, as a child, has been systematically punished for privileging the self, the teaching that the self is illusory may simply “make sense” on an intuitive level.

On a deep level, the salvational structures of the Abrahamic and the karmic religions follow the same childhood prototype. Yet on the surface, the differences are impressive. We end by considering two of these surface differences.

First, within the Abrahamic religions, the innate, willful self is viewed as *real*—it exists, is undesirable, and must be actively combatted—whereas in karmic religions this individual self and will are posited to be *illusions*. Although the philosophical distinction between a real self and an illusory “self” may seem profound, the practical consequence for believers is small. In both cases, if one is to avoid suffering, the natural self, which is identified with the will, must be negated or transcended. These Abrahamic and karmic teachings are variations on a common theme. In all cases, the goal is to subdue, submerge, mortify or negate the willful self.

Second, within the Abrahamic religions, punishment occurs through the action of a divine, potentially wrathful, and explicitly or implicitly anthropomorphic and often parental Judge. In contrast, in the Eastern traditions, retribution occurs through a seemingly naturalistic process that is built into the structure of the universe, a process that operates as a kind of natural retributive law—the “law of karma.” It is obvious how the notion of a damning Judge might have arisen: it is a literal, point-by-point theological projection of the historical childrearing norm. But how might karmic teachings have emerged through traumatic childrearing practices? Here, I suggest that that when childrearing norms prescribe corporal discipline for disobedience, infractions may be punished so consistently and (from the child’s perspective) so *automatically* that retribution might

be perceived as arising through a kind of natural process. This perception of retributive automaticity may be especially strong when children are very young—during the developmental period when the child’s grasp of the distinction between self and other, and between the parent and the broader world, are incompletely formed. Perhaps it is this dimension of the childhood experience—the seeming naturalness and automaticity of punishment—that has preferentially shaped the karmic myth. Once we recognize that karma is actually *a metaphysic of automatic retribution for willful desire*, this speculation seems entirely plausible.

Summary and Conclusions

In this article, we have seen that the narrative and salvation myths which lie at the heart of many religions thematically overlap, or parallel, patterns of childhood abuse and trauma in the cultures where those myths originated. The precision, extent, and degree of concreteness or abstraction of the overlap varies among the religious traditions. Yet in all the cases we have considered, the evidence appears to be sufficiently strong for us to conclude that childhood experience likely forms a psychological platform on which the religious systems have been built.

The religions and myths we have considered are diverse. They include traditions both Western and Eastern, monotheistic and polytheistic, extant and extinct, and those that function through a metaphysic that is devoid of divine agents. This diversity raises the possibility that trauma-related links with childhood may be a fundamental feature of other religions as well, or possibly even of religion as a category of human experience. Of the extant religions we considered, some combination of corporal punishment, abandonment, neglect, and the coercive suppression of the child’s will appears to be the major underlying trauma.

The existence of thematic overlaps between childhood experience and the religious myths we considered suggests that several distinct yet related forms of causal influence may be at play. To start with, it appears that during the formative periods of these religions, cultural patterns of childhood trauma were, so to speak, translated into religious myth and then projected, or schematically mapped, onto the cosmos. Examples given in the discussion of Christianity indicate that, during the translation process, patterns of trauma can function as an organizing principle, providing a flexible, thematic template for the modification, combination, and recontextualization of pre-existing religious and cultural elements. Thinking in terms of a flexible organizing principle helps us to make sense of profound underlying similarities in these religious systems while also recognizing that, in more superficial respects, the systems are very different—as between Abrahamic conceptions of an overtly anthropomorphic Judge and Eastern conceptions of a seemingly natural law of automatic retribution.

Along with the mythic translation and mapping of the trauma, we observed in some of the myths a tendency for the narrative to deviate in a predictable manner from the pattern of the actual trauma. This deviation acts to ameliorate the underlying trauma by adding a happy ending. Such endings are evident especially in the early Greco-Roman myths about abandoned children, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and in the Abrahamic myths about the sacrificial sons (Isaac—or

Ishmael—and Jesus). This happy ending can readily be understood as a palliation, distraction, or psychological defense against the pain of the original trauma—an attempt to undo in myth and symbol what cannot be undone in reality.

Finally, there is reason to suspect that childhood themes in religious myths can produce powerful psychological resonances in the minds of believers and potential converts. These resonances may be primarily *emotional*—such as fears and longings, as well as tremendous joy in response to narrative amelioration; *cognitive*—for example, when myths that otherwise seem almost literally unbelievable are imbued with verisimilitude and may even be perceived as True in an absolute, transcendent, metaphysical sense; and *behavioral*—for example, when rituals or sacraments seem to function as post-traumatic behavioral repetitions. These emotional, cognitive, and behavioral resonances overlap, interact, and mutually support each other, forming an integrated pattern that recapitulates the painful realities of childhood. To the extent that traumatizing childrearing practices have persisted beyond the formative stage of a religion—and in all cases considered here they have—such overlapping resonances can go far in explaining why the religion has spread and retained popularity in the culture.

Final Reflections: Childhood Trauma and the Future of Religion

Religious beliefs arise at a relatively late developmental moment in the life of the individual. Even among those “born into” a religion—to say nothing of those who convert later in life—such beliefs emerge only slowly, starting first in the pre-verbal period of childhood, in response to images and sounds, and continuing during the verbal stage of childhood, in response to an understanding of words and ideas. However, even after the child enters the verbal stage of development, his beliefs remain for years only partially formed, because they are limited by the child’s immature ability to grasp complex ideas.

In contrast to these late-arising religious beliefs, which seem to separate individuals of different religions from one another, all humans share something immutable and primal, although they often do not recognize it: the experience of childhood.

As human beings, we are all born tiny and helpless. Unlike in many species, this helplessness persists for years, during which time we are powerless to either nurture or protect ourselves. Whether we live or die, flourish or wither, feel safe or afraid, sated or starved is largely and often utterly beyond our control. This situation confronts us fully from the moment of birth.

The infant’s knowledge of his situation is inchoate but intense. He does not need speech or reason to grasp that he is dependent and vulnerable; his first helpless cries of hunger or fear make that clear. As the infant grows into toddlerhood and beyond, his dependency and vulnerability persist to a great extent, while his developing powers of mind let the child understand with increasing precision just how tenuous his position in the universe is. No matter which religious beliefs they are later taught, all young children know, implicitly and at the deepest level, that their existence

depends, moment by moment, on the grace and mercy of a wholly superior power—that of adults, especially parents. This knowledge, gained directly and experientially, is the child’s first and most profound religious education.

Early life experiences, and our powerful emotional responses to them, are not remembered in the usual sense. Through a variety of developmental and psychological processes, these recollections are obscured, as if by a veil, largely inaccessible to conscious recall. These early experiences thus seem to most adults almost inconceivably remote, even as if they never occurred at all. This may be doubly true for some intensely painful and frightening experiences, which the mechanisms of traumatic dissociation and distortion can obscure, to one degree or another, even in older children. Nonetheless, the mind retains a deep imprint of these early experiences, which can later be assimilated into other circumstances and relationships.

The realm of religion provides an especially fertile field for the reemergence of these early unremembered memories. Because religious beliefs are rooted in faith and understood to be an expression of faith, there is little expectation that they will abide by the constraints of observed reality. The content of faith can thus be held as true within the mind, sealed off more or less hermetically from the broader context of cognitive understanding and daily experience. As in the realm of dreaming, the dearth of cognitive and empirical constraint gives psychological processes free reign, providing early and dissociated memories and patterns of experience easy and unhindered expression. And so, in seemingly remote theological contexts, themes of childhood—the fears and longings, the desperate strategies to avoid punishment and gain love, the struggle to suppress one’s will and obey the will of the parent—assert themselves anew.

When Western society awoke during the Renaissance to the possibility that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system, insoluble pieces of the astronomical puzzle began to fall into place. Soon, an idea that previously seemed impossible or misbegotten, that the earth was a planet among planets, became so obvious that, not long after, people would look back, incredulous, that anyone could have thought otherwise. The revolutionary idea quickly became commonplace, part of the cultural and intellectual status quo. As with the Copernican revolution, psychological ideas pertaining to the profound impact of childhood experience on religion and other domains of culture and society may soon become uncontroversial and prosaic.

Although the ideas explored in this article may initially be unsettling or even disturbing, they can ultimately prove profoundly reassuring. They can lay the foundation for a more nurturing humanity: a humanity that will find the love, attention, and safety it needs in childhood, so that it will no longer be forced to address its fears and longings in the realm of theology, myth, and mystical belief. At the same time, by revealing the essential similarity of childhood mental function and suffering—across time and place and culture—these ideas can help disclose the fundamental unity of humanity, exposing as illusory many of the differences that now appear to separate cultural groups, and generations past and present, from one another.

NOTES

- [1] Cambino (1995), see pp. 86-89. Posidippus quoted on p. 87.
- [2] Tacitus and Soranus cited in Etienne, p. 132.
- [3] Boswell (1990). For Heiroclese, p. 87; also see pp. 12, 91, and 134.
- [4] Boswell (1990), p. 129.
- [5] Boswell (1990), p. 78.
- [6] Boswell (1990), pp. 113, 96, 159; Greenleaf (1978), p. 19; DeMause (1998), p. 31.
- [7] Boswell (1990), pp. 76-7.
- [8] For a modern contextualization, see Kertzer (1993), p. 105, who discusses the frequency with which abandoned children in modern Europe were attacked by wild pigs and dogs.
- [9] For a striking but possibly apocryphal example, see Herlihy (1978), p. 123.
- [10] Propp (1999), pp. 156-158.
- [11] “Hades” refers to both the underworld and the god who rules it.
- [12] See Foley (1994, p. 36); Fantham, Foley, Kampen, Pomeroy, and Shapiro (1994, p. 27); Oakley and Sinos (1993).
- [13] See Oakley and Sinos (1993): on eating of fruit, p. 35; on coercion during the wedding night, p. 37.
- [14] On the domestic situation of women in the classical period, see Pomeroy et al (1999, pp. 233-239, 476); Fantham et. al. (1994, Chapter 3, esp. pp. 68-74, 79-80, 101-106; Socrates quoted on p. 103).
- [15] See, e.g., Fantham et al (1999, p. 27); Oakley and Sinos (1993, p. 35); Lincoln (1979, p. 228); Foley (1994, p. 80); Parker (1991, p. 6).
- [16] Foley (1994, p. 112): “As in the Hymn, goddesses retain a far wider range of powers and capacities for independent action than do their mortal counterparts.”

[17] Most biblical scholars agree that the books which compose the New Testament were written in the broader Roman empire (probably not in Palestine) and that the language of composition was Greek, the lingua franca of the Roman world.

[18] Gardner & Wiedemann (1991), p. 12.

[19] Gardner & Wiedemann (1991), p. 5.

[20] *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 4.17.25

[21] Discussed in Saller (1994), p. 147.

[22] *De Constantia Sapientis* 12.3

[23] *Essay on Providence* 2.5

[24] *Institutio Oratoria*, 1.3.16

[25] Oribasius, *Libri incerti*, 17

[26] For Proverbs, see 13:24, 22:15, and 23:13. For Sirach, which was influential in Hellenistic communities in the first century BCE and very likely later, see 30:1-3 and 30:12. Philo and Josephus endorse, and actually expand the scope of, the capital prescription of Deuteronomy 21:18-21. For Philo, see *The Special Laws*, 2.232 and 2.248. For Josephus, see *Against Apion*, Book 2:28. It is unclear whether Philo's and Josephus' endorsements reflect actual 1st century C.E. practice, but either way their comments are revealing. By the Rabbinic period, starting around 200 C.E., this Deuteronomic law was effectively interpreted out of existence.

[27] *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 5.9

[28] See e.g., Gunkel (1901/1997) pp. 1, 14, 19, 32; Speiser (1964, p. 25); Abelow (2010).

[29] Greven (1973), p. 48.

[30] In Judaism, traditions about sin, punishment, and obedience are often described as pertaining to "redemption," rather than "salvation," but the meaning is essentially the same.

[31] For a concise discussion of paternal discipline in traditional Arab culture, see the literature review in Patai (1971), pp. 412-419. Quotes from p. 415.

[32] See Friedman (2003), note on p. 65, as well as Levenson (1993) and the commentary by Propp (2006) on Exodus 22:28, pp. 263-271. Within the framework of the documentary

hypothesis, the “E” document, which is hypothesized to underlie the story, may narrate a completed sacrifice.

[33] Actually, if we include the barely mentioned offspring of Abraham’s third wife, Keturah, Ishmael and Isaac were the first of eight children.

[34] Terr, 1990, p. 202.

[35] In the words of a modern scholar of karmic thought, this creedal assessment, first made by the medieval Muslim scholar al-Biruni, “may be questionable, but it is certainly understandable” (Halbfass, 1998, p. 209).

[36] See Smith (2000, p. 109).

[37] For discussions of the mechanisms of karma and the role of volitional desire in driving reincarnation see Hallisey (2000, p. 29), Smith (2000, p.108), and Halbfass (1998, pp. 212-215).

[38] Quoted from Masumian (1995, p. 52).

[39] Smith (2000) p. 110

[40] For a sense of traumatic aspects of traditional Indian childrearing practices, see Poffenberger (1981), p. 91.

[41] All quotes in this paragraph are from Halbfass (1998), pp. 212-215.

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