

# CHAPTER 6

## Religious Behavior as a Reflection of Childhood Punishment

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Various scholars have discussed the possible influence of childhood on religion. Some of these scholars have argued that aspects of religion and religious life have been shaped by cultural norms of childhood punishment and submission, especially as occurring within the framework of patriarchal society.<sup>1</sup> In my own work, I have argued that New Testament narrative and salvation teachings were shaped by historically widespread patterns of childhood punishment and abandonment.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I extend my analysis of Christianity to include behavior. Specifically, I examine the foundational rituals (or sacraments) of baptism and Eucharist; the well-known teaching, ascribed to Jesus, to “turn the other cheek”; and the broad religious-ethical prescription to imitate Christ. I argue that these behaviors are intimately tied to New Testament themes which themselves were shaped by childhood. I also consider the possibility that a biologically rooted mechanism of psychological trauma might influence religious behavior. To provide a foundation, I begin by recapitulating some of my work on links between childhood punishment and New Testament themes.<sup>3</sup> It should be understood that, in this chapter, my explanation of New Testament passages will at times diverge from those of traditional Christian interpreters.

## NEW TESTAMENT THEMES REFLECT PATTERNS OF CHILDHOOD PUNISHMENT

Throughout history, children have been corporally punished to inculcate obedience. Such punishment has been both widespread and socially prescribed. Evidence on this point is substantial from ancient times to the modern period, though full documentary details are beyond the scope of this chapter. In general, the father has been the ultimate source of disciplinary authority and has often been the primary “hands on” disciplinarian.

In fact, physical discipline has historically been so central to the father’s role that one finds reference to the idea that a child, especially a son, who is *not* punished by the father might be presumed illegitimate. This idea is expressed in the New Testament itself. The book of Hebrews, usually dated to around 65 CE, asserts that *all* sons are punished, and then asks, “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 12:5–8).<sup>4</sup> As recently as the nineteenth century, the Englishman John Epps (1806–1869) wrote of his childhood, “my father felt obliged to testify to the fact of my being his child, by correction.”<sup>5</sup>

Holding in mind these endemic patterns of childhood punishment, it is instructive to consider New Testament narrative and salvation teachings. Doing so, one finds strong thematic parallels with the experiences of ordinary children.

To begin, observe that the Son, Jesus, suffers corporally according to the will of his heavenly Father. This teaching is emphasized throughout the New Testament. According to Paul, the Father “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Romans 8:32). In the Gospel of John, when Peter tries to prevent Jesus’ capture, Jesus rebukes him, saying, “the cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?” (18:11). The “cup” refers to the fate that Jesus knows awaits him. John’s Gospel goes so far as having the Father himself, speaking in “a voice from heaven,” indicate that He is responsible for 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). Acts even gives the impression that the Father, like a divine playwright, scripted the actions of everyone involved in the crucifixion: Herod, Pontius Pilate, Gentiles, and Jews all “were gathered together . . . to do whatever Thy hand and Thy plan

predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27–28). In observing the central role of the Father in his Son’s suffering, we find close thematic parallels with the historical situation of ordinary children.

As Jesus contemplates his fate, his sadness and fear is palpable. 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) we read of Jesus’ emotional “agony.” The book of Hebrews (5:7) describes Jesus’ “loud cries and tears” and his intense “fear.”<sup>6</sup> Filled with sorrow and fear, Jesus implores his heavenly Father to remove the “cup” of punishment, or pain, from before him: “Father, all things are possible for you; remove this cup from before me” (Mark 14:35–36 and parallels). In all this, Jesus’ responses closely parallel the sadness, terror, and desperate pleading of ordinary children faced with impending punishment. Ultimately, Jesus resigns himself to his fate, saying, “Father. . .not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36 and parallels). In so speaking, Jesus expresses a posture of filial submission that has, time immemorial, been forced upon ordinary children. And when Hebrews (5:8) says of Jesus, “he learned obedience by the things which he suffered,” the parallels with ordinary childhood discipline are unmistakable.

Parallels with childhood are evident, also, within Christian salvation teachings. In childhood, historically and often still, disobedience leads to punishment by the father, whereas obedience leads to benign treatment. Starting with Paul’s New Testament letters, we find the same pattern within Christianity. Disobedience—Adam’s sin in the Biblical garden—leads to punishment for humans, whereas obedience to the Father—the action of Jesus—leads to salvation. Here are the seminal lines from Paul, which became foundational for later 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)

The strength of this salvational parallel with ordinary childhood becomes clear if we allow ourselves to apply the term “salvation” to childhood. Then we can say that for both the child within the family and the believer within the cosmos, salvation from punishment is attained through filial obedience. This parallel is rendered even more

precise by two facts. First, human beings are themselves considered children of the heavenly Father. Thus, both in ordinary childhood and in Christian teachings about damnation, it is *children* who are subject to punishment by the father/Father. Second, Adam himself is sometimes described as a child—Luke’s Gospel (3:38) calls him “the Son of God”—and his sin has a child-like quality to it;<sup>7</sup> thus, there is a sense in which Adam’s sin is not simply disobedience, per se, but *filial* disobedience.

Finally, observe the central place of *fear* in the believer’s relationship with the heavenly Father. Luke’s and Matthew’s Gospels have Jesus intone: “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!” In the opening lines of the earliest surviving Christian text (ca. 50 CE), Paul recounts the conversion of the Thessalonians to Christianity: they turned from idols to God and waited for “Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:9–10). In the letter to the Ephesians (2:2–3), we read that the Father’s wrath is provoked, specifically, by the disobedience of his human children.<sup>8</sup> Again, the parallels with ordinary childhood are unmistakable. Just as the righteous anger of human fathers has, throughout history, filled children with fear, so the heavenly Father’s righteous anger is a source of terror for His human “children.” Likewise, paternal wrath, both on earth and in heaven, is provoked by disobedience.

Thus, in New Testament narrative, salvation theology, and emotional experience we find striking parallels with patterns of ordinary childhood punishment. These parallels, I think most readers will agree, are too extensive and precise to plausibly be explained by chance. A likely explanation is that foundational New Testament traditions were shaped in response to the situation of children in the highly patriarchal formative matrix of early Christianity. Furthermore, punishment, especially by fathers, remained the cultural norm throughout the medieval and much of the modern periods; often, it remains the norm still. This fact raises the distinct possibility that New Testament traditions have been found meaningful and emotionally resonant, for most of the Christian era, at least partly because they portray the painful realities of human childhood. For those countless believers who, as children, suffered physical punishment by their fathers, New Testament teachings simply “made sense.”

## RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR IN ITS THEOLOGICAL AND CHILDHOOD CONTEXTS

So far, I have focused on the *external* circumstances of children—that is, what is done *to* the child. But when children are compelled to obey, they also undergo a specific *internal* process. Because it is, ultimately, the child's will and "willfulness" that lead to disobedience and hence punishment, children reared with corporal discipline learn that, to avoid punishment, they must suppress the will and psychologically disengage from aspects of their inner selves that are associated with willfulness. Put differently, to avoid disobedient actions, and hence punishment, children learn to "nip the problem in the bud" by suppressing their own motivational tendency toward willfulness.

Remarkably, foundational Christian teachings reflect this inner psychological process. The internal childhood requirement to suppress, repudiate, and negate willful aspects of the self is expressed in the powerful language of religious metaphor: to avoid eternal punishment, the believer must "die to the self" and be reborn "in Christ." Here it is essential to recognize that the "self" which must die is the *disobedient* self, specifically, the self that is tainted with Adam's primal act of willful disobedience. Likewise, the Christ in whom the Christian is said to be reborn is the Son who, in his relationship with his heavenly Father, is the obedient child *par excellence*: the Son, obedient even "unto death," who says, "Father . . . not what I will, but what you will."

Once it is recognized that Adam and Jesus mythically exemplify and personify, respectively, disobedience and filial obedience, a key psychological element of the believer's engagement with the Adam-Jesus story becomes transparent. In pursuing the Christian path, believers attempt to metaphysically realign themselves from Adam to Jesus, that is, from disobedience to obedience, thereby avoiding punishment by the Father. In attempting this realignment, believers metaphorically but precisely *reenact* the childhood experience of subjugating the will—"dying to the [willful] self"—to avoid paternal punishment. Put differently, in undertaking the quintessentially Christian act of accepting and identifying with Jesus, believers voluntarily repeat, on the level of religious symbolism, an internal process that was *forced* upon them as children.

At this point we can begin speaking of behavior, specifically, baptism and Eucharist. For these two quintessential Christian rituals

(and sacraments) are overt behavioral expressions of the believers' attempt to shift their affiliation from Adam to Jesus.

Baptism is the religious rite associated with becoming a Christian. It involves a ritual cleansing with water, often viewed as a washing away of sin. Some Christians understand baptism as the actual means by which believers enter into the mystical body of the Church, effecting the spiritual merger with Jesus Christ. These Christians take Paul literally when he says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:12–13). Other Christians, who accept Paul's words somewhat less literally, understand baptism as imparting a ritual or community seal on a process of inner conversion to Christ. Notice that, however understood, baptism is by no means an isolated "behavior" that can be understood outside its context of theological meaning. Rather, baptism is a behavioral *dimension* of a fully integrated symbolic system comprising cognition, affect, and behavior.

To better understand how closely behavioral and nonbehavioral elements are integrated within Christian ritual, consider some of the links, evident in baptism, among belief, behavior, and narrative. In becoming a Christian, one is said to become a new person. The old, willfully disobedient self, who is identified with Adam, is said to be metaphysically transformed into, or replaced by, a new, innocent, obedient self, who is identified with the Christ-Child, the preternaturally obedient Son. This transformation is often described as a death and rebirth: the believer dies to the old self and is reborn in Christ. This is one reason why, traditionally, many baptismal fonts have been constructed at ground level. During the immersion in water, the individual passes below ground level, as if entering a grave, signifying the death of the old self; and when the individual rises from this "grave," he or she is understood to be resurrected new, obedient, and Christ-like.

In fact, this sequence of ritually constructed death (of the willful self) and birth (of the obedient, Christ-willed 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. Paul describes the process this way:

When we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death. By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead

in the splendor of the Father, so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life. (Romans 6:3–4)

Thus, the ritual, or sacrament, of baptism is inseparable from narrative and salvational themes involving Adam and Jesus, disobedience and obedience, punishment and salvation, and the Son's relationship to the Father. As I discussed, these themes closely parallel, and appear to have been shaped in response to, endemic patterns of childhood punishment and inculcated obedience. As much as the narrative and salvational themes themselves, I suggest, the rite of baptism appears to reflect the painful realities of childhood.

Let me emphasize this last point in a particular way. For the child, the regime of physical discipline produces a profound inner "conversion"—a changing of the mind—from disobedience to obedience, from willfulness to filial submission. Notice that the Christian convert is understood to experience an almost identical change of mind: from willfulness (Adam) to filial obedience (Christ). In both cases, the change is driven by fear of punishment and the desire for parental love—that is, a desire for "salvation." Thus, the adult's (voluntary, religious) conversion forms a striking parallel with the child's (compulsory, psychological) "conversion." The strength of this parallel, which itself is closely aligned with other parallels we have observed, leads me to suggest that the Christian conversion experience may have its ultimate psychological roots in the inculcation of childhood obedience. As I wrote a few paragraphs earlier: "[I]n undertaking the quintessentially Christian act of accepting and identifying with Jesus, the believer voluntarily repeats, on the level of religious symbolism, an internal process that was *forced* upon him as a child." Baptism provides the primary behavioral expression of this childhood repetition.

Consider now the Eucharist (aka communion, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper). In the ritual, or sacrament, of Eucharist, the believer consumes consecrated bread, wine, or both, which are often conceived of as being the body and blood of Jesus Christ in either a physical or a spiritual sense. This sacrament is rooted in Jesus' words to his disciples: "Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, 'Take, eat: this is my body'" (Mark 14:22). According to the Gospel of John, Jesus stated that eating the Eucharist is necessary for salvation: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you . . . [but] he who eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has eternal life" (John 6:53–54). When the believer performs the Eucharist, he sees himself as ingesting Jesus'

body and blood—literally, spiritually, or symbolically—and is nourished by them. The Eucharist thus enacts, on the level of physical substance, the notion that Christ is in the believer. One might even say the Eucharist *puts* Christ into the believer, making him more Christ-like. As Jesus is quoted, “He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, dwells in me, and I in him” (John 6:56).

Like baptism, the Eucharist should be understood as a behavioral expression of an integrated process by which believers attempt to realign themselves metaphysically from disobedient Adam to the obedient Son, Jesus. As discussed, this realignment, and thus the Eucharist itself, forms precise thematic parallels with the child’s compulsory “realignment” (or “conversion”) to obedience. The Eucharist, like baptism, thus appears to provide a symbolic, culturally sanctioned behavioral reenactment of an internal process that has, throughout history, been forced upon children.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AS A POSSIBLE MECHANISM IN RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR

In my initial discussion of New Testament themes, I referred to the prominent place of fear. Here it is useful to elaborate. In the New Testament context, fear arises primarily because the heavenly Father wields the threat of hell, which has often been understood as punishment of infinite intensity and duration. If one takes seriously this threat, then it is no exaggeration to say that one is contemplating a situation of ultimate trauma, a situation that, once entered into, is inescapable and unendurable. It is a perfect, eternal torture, a situation almost beyond the capacity of the mind to contemplate, much less to endure in reality.

If it is true, as I have suggested, that this theologically imagined punitive structure parallels, and was shaped in response to, the suffering of ordinary childhood, then it is natural to ponder more deeply about the nature and consequences of childhood punishments—to ponder, even, whether the long history of childhood punishment might actually be a history of socially sanctioned childhood trauma. Without attempting to answer this question in a specific way—for it is full of complexities and uncertainties<sup>9</sup>—it is noteworthy that reports spanning at least 2,000 years have described states of intense fear and terror arising from routine childhood punishments. A few examples follow. During the first century CE, in his *Institutio Oratoria* (1.3.16),



Quintilian hints that Roman children commonly became so terrified during beatings that they lost bowel or bladder control: “when children are beaten, the pain and fear often have results which it is not pleasant to speak of and which will later be a source of embarrassment.” St. Augustine, reared in fourth-century Roman North Africa, described the unbearable terror he and his classmates experienced during school beatings; writing as an adult, Augustine compared these beatings to actual torture.<sup>10</sup> Closer to our own time, Winston Churchill described how merely witnessing a beating can terrify and produce involuntary physiological reactions. He tells how boys at his prep school, forced to watch beatings of wayward classmates, “sat quaking.”<sup>11</sup> The twentieth century evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson describes how beatings at home led her to a state of disorganized panic: “I stood looking wildly about for a way out of the dilemma. No earthly recourse was nigh. . . . Dropping to my knees on the side of my bed, I began to pray, loudly, earnestly.”<sup>12</sup> In some cases, unexceptional experiences of punishment appear to have produced psychological dissociation and amnesia, responses often considered to be indicative of psychological trauma.<sup>13</sup>

Whether and to what extent corporal punishments are strictly traumatic, we are certainly dealing with a phenomenon that exists, at the very least, at the *margins* of trauma. For this reason, it is appropriate to discuss childhood punishments with reference to situations that are typically understood as traumatic, to see how childhood punishments are similar to and different from these other situations.

A variety of extraordinary events—including violent attack, physical torture, military battle, and natural disaster—can produce psychological harm. The events most likely to be harmful are those involving an inescapable threat of death, severe injury, or intense pain. Such unavoidable threats tend to produce an experience of overwhelming fear, horror, and helplessness. The terms “trauma” and “traumatic” have been used to describe these damaging events. Although no single definition for trauma has gained universal acceptance, a useful working definition is the following: a stressful event that is both inescapable and of a magnitude that tends to overwhelm the individual’s normal coping mechanisms.

Following a psychologically traumatic event, some victims experience visual flashbacks, in which—with varying degrees of clarity—they see the event happening again. Trauma victims may also have repetitive nightmares, which portray the event with some combination of literal and figurative imagery. It has also been observed that some

trauma victims repeat or reenact aspects of the trauma in their waking *behaviors*. Bessel A. van der Kolk, M.D., a professor and trauma expert at the Boston University Medical School, writes:

Many traumatized people expose themselves, seemingly compulsively, to situations reminiscent of the original trauma. These behavioral reenactments are rarely consciously understood to be related to earlier life experiences.<sup>14</sup>

It has been suggested that behavioral repetitions of this sort are especially common among persons who enter into a state of psychological dissociation during the traumatic event. Thus, the Harvard psychiatrist and neurologist James Chu refers to post-traumatic reenactments as the “reliving of dissociated trauma.”<sup>15</sup> There are documented reports of post-traumatic behavioral repetitions involving babies and children (including those with no conscious recollection of their traumas), adolescents, and adults.<sup>16</sup> As fantastic as it may seem, one medical study even raises the possibility that experiences at *birth* may be reenacted later in life.<sup>17</sup>

Although the underlying mechanisms responsible for post-traumatic repetition are poorly understood, studies in the biology of trauma may point to an explanation. Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D., a researcher in this area, writes:

The prime “directive” of the human brain is to promote survival. . . . Therefore, the brain is “over-determined” to sense, process, store, perceive and mobilize in response to threatening information. . . . All areas of the brain and body are recruited and orchestrated for optimal survival tasks during the threat. This total neurobiological participation in the threat response is important in understanding how a traumatic experience can impact and alter functioning in such a pervasive fashion. Cognitive, emotional, social, behavioral and physiological residue of a trauma may impact an individual for years—even a lifetime.<sup>18</sup>

Essential to Perry’s point is that, in situations of threat and extreme physiological arousal, the body processes information in extraordinary and redundant ways, via multiple pathways, leaving memory traces in numerous brain areas, some of which are not accessible to conscious awareness yet may still influence behavior and other functions. Recently, a neural network model has been proposed that attempts

to explain trauma-related repetitions as pattern completions in hippocampal and thalamocortical pathways.<sup>19</sup>

As noted, the inability to escape from a threatening situation—in other words, the experience of helplessness—is central to the phenomenon of trauma. Although helplessness plays a crucial role in virtually all traumas, the experience of helplessness is not the same in all types of trauma. During a natural disaster, say a flood or earthquake, persons are sometimes able to improve their chances of survival through active and rational struggle. With even brief advance warning, they can attempt to prepare for the event or to flee. They may be able to hide under tables or in doorways, climb out of rubble or onto rooftops, or attach themselves to flotsam. They can even curse the blind forces that confront them, if they wish. Even when events develop too quickly or massively for protective action to provide any benefit, it is relevant that there is nothing in principle that prevents victims from *attempting* to take action to save themselves—and, in fact, it is generally wise for them to make this attempt, even if the effort ultimately proves futile.

For the corporally punished child, the situation is rather different. This child is not merely overwhelmed physically by the superior power of the parent but is *forbidden* to take protective action of any sort. Consider a child who tries to protect himself during punishment by fleeing or by repositioning his body to shield the area being targeted for blows. Unlike the earthquake victim, such a child will not help his situation: he may well bring about a renewal, prolongation, or intensification of punishment. If the child takes a more active strategy, for instance, trying to deflect or ward off blows with hands or feet, punishment may be additionally intensified. If the child goes further still and attempts to strike back, either to retaliate or in hopes of deterring continued punishment, he will be punished even more severely. The child quickly learns that to respond defensively, to resist in any way, is worse than futile; it is dangerous. As historian Philip Greven has written, “Children who resist are often hurt the most, since adults who intend to inflict corporal punishments usually do not allow children to retaliate or to resist.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, both in modern writings on childhood discipline and in the historical literature, parents are admonished to intensify punishment in response to a child’s resistance. The terse recommendation of Italian Renaissance writer Giovanni Dominici—“Double the punishment if they deny or excuse their fault or if they do not submit to punishment”<sup>21</sup>—is just one of many comparable formulations.

More than this, children have long been compelled to actively *participate* in the very assault that is waged against them—for instance, to voluntarily strip and assume the position in which they will be beaten; or to go into the woods and pick the birch saplings with which they will be whipped; or to thank their parents for beating them; or even to kiss the rod with which they were just chastised. Children who refused to participate in these ways were considered to be acting willfully, and their punishments were intensified accordingly. Thus, if children are to be active at all during punishment, if they are to take concrete steps to ameliorate the punishment or diminish its extent, their activity must be of a paradoxical sort: they must *facilitate* the assault.

Keeping in mind this enforced pattern of paradoxical childhood behavior, consider the Christian ethical emphasis on acceptance of unearned suffering. According to Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, Jesus teaches that when one is struck on the cheek one should not strike back or even shield oneself. Instead, one should present the other cheek so it might be struck as well. Thus Matthew states, "Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (5:39). Notice that this ethical prescription almost perfectly depicts *the actual situation* of children during punishment: a child who must acquiesce in and facilitate his or her own punishment is, in essence, being made to turn the other cheek.

The ethical prescription to "turn the cheek" may, at first glance, seem idiosyncratic and unrelated to other Christian teachings. If this were so, then discussing the prescription would seem arbitrary and of little general importance. However, this singular teaching, in fact, epitomizes a central thrust of Christian ethics. To begin with, notice that the prescription to "turn the cheek" is entirely consistent with the underlying theological theme of the Gospel story. Jesus, who is innocent, is crucified for a sin he did not commit, and his voluntary acceptance of this suffering is seen as proper. Likewise, a person who is struck on the cheek without provocation is also, so to speak, being punished for a sin he did not commit. To expose one's other cheek to the same attack is to see the unearned suffering as proper and to extend its scope. To turn the cheek is to be voluntarily crucified, writ small; to be voluntarily crucified is to turn the cheek, writ large. The singular ethical prescription and the theologically central Passion narrative are cut from the same cloth.

Once one recognizes the fundamental thematic link between Jesus' admonition to turn the cheek and Jesus' own acceptance of unearned

suffering, it becomes clear that the prescription to turn the cheek is an admonition to imitate Christ or, put differently, to follow in his footsteps. In fact, a core ethical injunction within Christianity has been to live in “imitation of Christ”—that is, to deliberately endure and even seek actual suffering in the manner of Christ: to live not only *in* Christ, through spiritual identification or mystical union, but to live *like* him as a deliberate lifestyle—i.e., behavioral—choice. This imitative injunction, which is often understood to be the foundation of the entire structure of Christian ethics, has its Biblical basis in lines such as these:

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. (Luke 17:10)

Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? (Matthew 20:22)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. (Romans 12:1)

When one considers these ethical teachings with an eye toward the experiences of ordinary children, one arrives at a remarkable conclusion: the very same modes of behavior that were *imposed* on children by overwhelming force, against their will, are now advocated *as models of adult virtue*. This conclusion is practically a tautology, since Jesus, the behavioral model, is, almost by definition, an innocent Child who suffered obediently according to the will of the Father. When the believer follows in Christ’s footsteps, he or she, in essence, steps into shoes that corporally punished children throughout history have already worn—for these children, reared under patriarchy, have suffered corporally according to the will of the (earthly) father. For those countless believers, past and present, who have experienced traditional modes of childhood discipline, imitating the suffering of Christ has offered, and continues to offer, a ready-made path for the behavioral repetition of childhood.

## CONCLUSION

In the quintessential sacramental rituals of Christianity (baptism and Eucharist), and in what is arguably Christianity’s broadest and most foundational ethical injunction (imitation of Christ), one finds striking thematic parallels with the painful realities of childhood. In the performance of these rituals and this injunction, one seems to

encounter culturally sanctioned behavioral repetitions from childhood. These parallels and repetitions mesh seamlessly with key narrative and salvational elements of the New Testament, which themselves appear to have been shaped by childhood.

As part of my presentation, I suggested that psychological trauma may play a role in determining religious behavior. However, this is just a possibility, for not enough is currently known about either trauma or childhood punishment to reach firm conclusions. Therefore, I present this aspect of my argument as food for thought. However, even if one assumes that trauma-related mechanisms are irrelevant, one still confronts a remarkable observed reality: precise parallels between childhood punishment and Christian religious experience, including its behavioral dimension. Whatever the mechanism, whether related to trauma or not, we must take these parallels seriously as an essential feature of religious experience and, accordingly, seek to understand them.

Much of this chapter has focused, explicitly or implicitly, on the historical development of religious teachings and injunctions. Absent plausible alternative explanations for the childhood-religion parallels we have observed, it seems likely that historical patterns of childhood corporal punishment helped shape religious narratives, salvation teachings, and behaviors during the formative period of Christianity. Perhaps a converse influence is now at work. Secularization is currently sweeping across Europe at the same time that corporal punishment is being legally banned in many European countries. It is striking that Sweden, known for its low rates of church attendance and sometimes considered the most secular of nations, was the first country (1979) to outlaw all forms of childhood corporal punishment. It is possible that a decrease in corporal punishment is leading to a lessening of interest in traditional Christianity. To help clarify the nature of these European relationships, a study could be done correlating rates of corporal punishment by country with rates of church attendance. One would predict a positive relationship.<sup>22</sup> It is hoped that some readers will take up the challenge of testing this prediction and of constructing other hypotheses relevant to the concepts presented in this chapter.

I have here focused exclusively on Christianity. I focused on one religion because of space limitations, as well as for conceptual simplicity; I chose Christianity because its parallels with childhood are especially transparent. This transparency arises naturally from the central place of the Father-Son relationship within Christian teaching.

However, other religions also contain parallels with childhood,<sup>23</sup> which are often more subtle than those found in Christianity. In my ongoing work, I am exploring childhood parallels in Judaism, Islam, and the religions arising from Indian culture. Thus, I end by suggesting that Christianity may provide not an isolated instance of childhood parallels, but an unusually clear example of what actually may be a widespread pattern in religious thought and practice.

## NOTES

1. See, e.g., Greven, P. (1977). *The Protestant temperament*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Greven, P. (1992). *Spare the child: The religious roots of punishment and the psychological impact of child abuse*. New York: Vintage Books; Brock, R. N. (1989). And a little child will lead us: Christology and child abuse. In J. C. Brown & C. R. Bohn (Eds.), *Christianity, patriarchy, and abuse* (pp. 42–61). Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press; Brock, R. N. (1991). *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of erotic power* (esp. pp. 50–56). New York: Crossroad; DeMause, L. (2002). *The emotional life of nations* (Chapter 9). New York: Other Press Books; Levenson, J. D. (1993). *The death and resurrection of the beloved Son: The transformation of child sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Schatzman, M. (1973). *Soul murder: Persecution in the family*. New York: Random House; Feierman, J. R. (2009). How religion *could* have evolved by natural selection. In V. Eckart & W. Schiefenöhvel (Eds.), *The biological evolution of religious mind and behavior*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag (also see Chapter 5, this volume); Persinger, M. A. (1987). *Neuropsychological bases of God beliefs* (e.g., pp. 67–69, 113–122). New York: Praeger. Freud, of course, also suggested links between childhood and religion, though much of his work is rooted in a vision of prehistorical childhood that is itself highly mythical; see Freud, S. (1962). *Totem and taboo*. New York: Norton.

2. For example, Abelow, B. (2007). What the history of childhood reveals about New Testament origins and the psychology of Christian belief. *The Review of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion*, 2, 11–16.

3. Ibid. Though a discussion of childhood abandonment could readily be built into my argument in this chapter, I will, because of space limitations, focus exclusively on childhood punishment.

4. In this chapter, I rely on the *Revised Standard Version* and a number of other Bible translations. In a few places I replace archaic words with modern equivalents or make minor changes in sentence structure to facilitate flow.

5. Pollack, L. (1983). *Forgotten children: Parent-child relations from 1500 to 1900* (p. 183). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

6. These New Testament images of suffering were, centuries later, reflected in formal church doctrine, which declared that Jesus is fully human



(and divine), capable of suffering the same physical and emotional pain as other humans.

7. As one important modern Biblical commentary notes, “When Adam has been caught in his transparent attempt at evasion [in the Garden], Yahweh speaks to him as a father would to his child: ‘Where are you?’ In this context, it is the same thing as, ‘And what have you been up to just now?’ This simple phrase—a single word in the [Hebrew] original—does the work of volumes. For what . . . [is] evoked is the childhood of mankind itself.” [Speiser, E. A. (1964). *The Anchor Bible Genesis: Introduction, translation, and notes* (p. 25). Garden City: Doubleday. (General Editors of the Anchor Series: W. F. Allbright & D. N. Freedman.)]

8. Referring to the “sons of disobedience”: “Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath.”

9. For example, childhood punishments have existed across a range of contexts and intensities and, therefore, the phenomenon in question is not homogeneous. Furthermore, basic questions about trauma (e.g., what, exactly, trauma is biologically and psychologically; the nature and consistency of its links with dissociation and repetitive phenomena; and how trauma should most appropriately be defined or diagnosed) are areas of ongoing investigation and theorizing.

10. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.9.15.

11. Rose, L. (1991). *The erosion of childhood: Child oppression in Britain 1860–1918* (pp. 186–187). London: Routledge.

12. Quoted in Greven, *Spare the child*, p. 24.

13. See *ibid.*, ix–x, for a personal example by a respected historian.

14. Van der Kolk, B. (1989). The compulsion to repeat the trauma. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 12, 389–411.

15. Chu, J. A. (1991). The repetition compulsion revisited: Reliving dissociated trauma. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 28, 327.

16. Terr, L. (1991). Childhood traumas: An outline and overview. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 148, 12–13; Terr, L. (1988). What happens to early memories of trauma? A study of twenty children under age five at the time of documented traumatic events. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 27, 98–99; Terr, L. (1990). *Too scared to cry: Psychic trauma in childhood* (pp. 233–280). New York: Harper & Row. Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror* (pp. 39–42). New York: Basic Books; Greven, *Spare the child*, pp. 178–186.

17. Jacobson, B., Eklund, G., Hamberger, L., et al. (1987). Perinatal origin of adult self-destructive behavior. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 76, 364–371.



18. Perry, B. D. (1999). Memories of fear. How the brain stores and retrieves physiologic states, feelings, behaviors and thoughts from traumatic events. Available at <http://www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/memories.asp>.

19. Javanbakht, A., & Ragan, C. L. (2008). A neural network model for transference and repetition compulsion based on pattern completion. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 36, 255–278.

20. Greven, *Spare the child*, p. 123.

21. Quoted in Ross, J. B. (1974). The middle-class child in urban Italy, fourteenth to early sixteenth century. In L. DeMause (Ed.), *The history of childhood: The untold story of child abuse* (p. 214). New York: Psychohistory Press.

22. Current measures of corporal punishment might not accurately indicate rates during the preceding generation or two, which would likely be the period of interest. This and other complications and potential confounders would need to be addressed in the experimental design and/or interpretation of the study. A positive correlation in this study would not, of course, in itself prove causality or the direction of influence.

23. Scholars who have explored childhood links in non-Christian religion include Levenson, *The death and resurrection of the beloved Son*; DeMause, *The emotional life of nations*; and Freud.