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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Children's Rights and Parents' Duties: A Textual Approach between the New Testament and the Qurʾan

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This article places Christian Scripture—with the New Testament as its focal text, read together with the Hebrew Bible that Christians receive as canonical—and the Qurʾan in comparative conversation on the rights of children and the corresponding duties of parents. Reading each scripture through its authoritative interpretive traditions—classical Sunnī and Twelver Shīʿī exegesis and ḥadīth on the Muslim side (Ṭabarī, Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr, Ṭūsī, Ṭabrisī, Kulaynī, the twentieth-century Ṭabāṭabāʾī, and Ghazālī's literature of ādāb), and patristic, medieval, and Reformation sources on the Christian side (Clement, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Menno Simons)—the study identifies five substantive convergences (the child as trust, the duty of provision, the prohibition of harm, reciprocal honor, and protection of the orphan) alongside four structural divergences (baptism and fiṭrah, adoption and lineage, inheritance, and discipline). The article argues that the child-parent relation, because it is universal, daily, and in both traditions held within a prior relation to God, offers a particularly hospitable site for Muslim-Christian dialogue, provided that neither tradition's account of the child is secured by caricaturing another—including, on the Christian side, the Jewish matrix of Jesus's own teaching.

Introduction: The Child as a Site of Comparative Ethical Inquiry

Few subjects are as universal, as daily, or as ethically demanding as the rearing of children, and few subjects have been so unevenly treated by comparative religious ethics. In the last two decades the theology of childhood has become a mature Christian subdiscipline; Marcia Bunge's landmark edited volumes *The Child in Christian Thought* (2001) and *The Child in the Bible* (2008), together with John Wall's philosophical work on "childism," have opened a field that had long been surprisingly thin.[1] A parallel Islamic

1 Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001), 1–28; Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds., *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008), xv–xxvi; and John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Georgetown University Press, 2010), 1–17.

literature—building on Avner Giladi's foundational work on childhood in medieval Muslim society—has grown but has largely developed in parallel with, rather than in dialogue with, the Christian scholarship.[2]

The purpose of this article is a modest bridging exercise: to place Christian Scripture, and especially the New Testament, and the Qur'an in comparative conversation on the rights of children and the corresponding duties of parents, and to ask what substantive convergence and honest divergence emerge when the two scriptures are read together through their authoritative interpretive traditions. The article does not claim exhaustiveness, but it does aim to be a resource that the child-and-parent literature in both traditions can recognize as its own, and one that models the disciplined comparative posture that the *Journal of Childhood and Religion* has cultivated.

The choice of subject is deliberate. The child-parent relation is arguably the most universally distributed ethical relation there is: Every adult in every religious community has been a child, and a large proportion have become parents. It is also a relation in which theology has to become daily practice or become nothing at all—a feature it shares with a small handful of other topoi (food, prayer, care of the dying) that comparative religious ethics has increasingly recognized as its most productive registers.[3]

A preliminary caution is nonetheless required, because the two texts compared here do not hold the same place in their traditions. For Muslims the Qur'an is the speech of God (*kalām Allāh*), revealed to the Prophet and received as verbatim divine address. In most of Sunnī theology it is held to be God's uncreated and eternal speech; the Imāmī theological tradition, which denies eternity to anything other than God, characteristically describes it as originated (*muḥdath*) speech, while affirming no less firmly its verbatim divine origin.[4] Christians, by contrast, receive the New Testament as inspired Scripture, written by human authors whom God moved to write, but not as divine dictation; the Word of God in the fullest Christian sense is Christ himself (John 1:1–14), to whom the apostolic writings bear witness.[5] The two texts also differ in genre. The New Testament is predominantly a literature of proclamation, discipleship, and interior conversion; the Qur'an legislates as well as exhorts. In topical scope, then, the Qur'an corresponds less to the New Testament alone than to the Christian Bible as a whole, in which the

2 Avner Giladi, *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society* (Macmillan, 1992), 1–19; and Giladi, *Muslim Midwives: The Craft of Birthing in the Premodern Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–24.

3 On the productive turn to the everyday in comparative religious ethics, see Elizabeth M. Bucar and Aaron Stalnaker, eds., *Religious Ethics in a Time of Globalism: Shaping a Third Wave of Comparative Analysis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–24; and Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–17.

4 On the Imāmī position on the speech of God, see al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-Maqālāt* (al-Mu'tamar al-'Ālamī li-Alfiyyat al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, 1413 AH). For a survey of the Sunnī and Shī'ī positions, see the introductory essays in Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015).

5 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (November 18, 1965), §§11–13, states the Catholic form of this position; the major Protestant confessions differ in emphasis but not on the point at issue here.

Torah's laws of inheritance, the Wisdom literature's counsels on discipline, and the prophets' defense of the orphan carry much of what the Qur'an says in its own voice. This asymmetry shapes the method adopted below.

The State of the Comparative Literature

The Christian theology of childhood is now a well-developed subdiscipline. The works named in this section are representative rather than exhaustive; each stands for a larger body of scholarship. Bunge's edited volumes offer a survey of Christian voices from the Hebrew Bible through John Wesley and Karl Rahner; Kristin Herzog has argued for a recentering of the child in Christian ethical thought; Bonnie Miller-McLemore has proposed a practical theology of childhood that reads the Christian tradition alongside feminist and social-scientific sources; and John Wall's *Ethics in Light of Childhood* has developed a philosophical case for what he calls "childism"—the systematic re-examination of ethical categories in light of the moral standing of children.[6] Karl Rahner's short but consequential "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood"—illustrative of a wider twentieth-century theological attention to childhood rather than a unique perspective—argued that childhood is not a stage merely to be passed through but a permanent theological condition: the receptive dependence that adult faith never leaves behind.

The Islamic literature on children has, until recently, been dominated by legal and social-historical studies. Avner Giladi's *Children of Islam* remains the standard survey of premodern Muslim attitudes to children, and his subsequent work on midwifery has extended the study to the physiological and ritual sides of birth and infancy.[7] The classical *fiqh* literature on children—covering paternity, custody (*ḥaḍāna*), maintenance (*nafaqa*), inheritance, and adoption (*tabannī*)—has been examined afresh by Wael Hallaq and Kecia Ali.[8] Here too the names are examples of a broader literature, not its boundary. But a straightforwardly comparative treatment of the two scriptural traditions on the child has been rare, and to our knowledge no full-length article has attempted the specific bridge attempted here.

The comparative gap has more than an academic significance. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by nearly every nation on earth, invokes a discourse of children's rights that both traditions have

6 Kristin Herzog, *Children and Our Global Future: Theological and Social Challenges* (Pilgrim, 2005), 1–24; Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (Jossey-Bass, 2003); and Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 1–17. For the early Christian period, see also O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans. Brian McNeil (Fortress, 2005); and Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens, "*Let the Little Children Come to Me*": *Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Catholic University of America Press, 2009). For a modern Catholic theological treatment, see Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8, trans. David Bourke (Herder & Herder, 1971), 33–50.

7 Giladi, *Children of Islam*, 1–19, 43–70.

8 Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 271–99; and Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 165–86.

their own reasons to affirm and their own difficulties in appropriating.[9] A comparative theological reading, done honestly, is one contribution to that larger conversation.

Methodological Framework and Its Limits

The study is qualitative and text-analytic. On the Qur'anic side, the sources are the classical Sunnī exegetes—Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, Zamakhsharī's *Kashshāf*, Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, and Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr*—together with the classical Twelver Imāmī exegetical tradition in Ṭūsī's *al-Tibyān* and Ṭabrisī's *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, and its twentieth-century continuation in Ṭabāṭabāʾī's *al-Mīzān*, a contemporary but traditional work rather than a "modern" one in the sense of being shaped by modernism; Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* is used for the literature of *ādāb* on the rearing of children.[10] Prophetic and imamic reports are cited from the two Sunnī *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections and the *Sunan* literature and, on the Imāmī side, from Kulaynī's *al-Kāfī*, Ibn Bābawayh's *Man Lā Yaḥḍuruhu al-Faqīh*, and the later encyclopedic collection of Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-Shīʿah*. Translations of the Qur'an are our own, made in consultation with those of Abdel Haleem and of *The Study Quran*; the latter's commentary, which draws on Sunnī and Shīʿī exegetes alike, is the most convenient companion in English to the exegetical sources named here.[11]

On the Christian side, the study takes the New Testament as its focal text but reads it, as the Christian tradition itself does, within the canon of Christian Scripture that includes the Hebrew Bible. Where the Hebrew Bible carries the weight of a theme—provision and instruction, honor of parents, inheritance, and discipline—it is engaged directly, and New Testament texts are not made to bear more than they say. The study draws on the classical patristic engagements with the child—Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*, John Chrysostom's *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children* and his homilies on Matthew and Ephesians, Augustine's autobiographical treatment of childhood in the *Confessions*, and Aquinas's

9 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted November 20, 1989, entered into force September 2, 1990. For a comparative theological reception, see Don S. Browning, *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies* (Eerdmans, 2006), 133–58; and, on the Islamic reception, Mashood A. Baderin, *International Human Rights and Islamic Law* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 111–37.

10 Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān fī Taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, 24 vols. (Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 2000); Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 4 vols. (Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1987); Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr (Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb)*, 32 vols. (Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1999–2000); Abū l-Fidāʾ Ismāʿīl ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, 8 vols. (Dār Ṭayyibah, 1999); Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb Qaṣīr al-ʿĀmilī, 10 vols. (Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.); al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 10 vols. (Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1986); Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 20 vols. (Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī, 1997); and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, 4 vols. (Dār al-Maʿrifah, n.d.).

11 M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qurʾan: A New Translation* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*. Ḥadīth citations follow Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 9 vols. (Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002); Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 5 vols. (Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1955); and Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, 4 vols. (al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, n.d.). Imāmī reports follow Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, 8 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1363 SH/1984); Ibn Bābawayh al-Ṣadūq, *Man Lā Yaḥḍuruhu al-Faqīh*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Jamāʿat al-Mudarrisīn, 1413 AH); and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-Shīʿah*, 30 vols. (Muʾassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth, 1409 AH).

discussion of piety toward parents in the *Summa Theologiae*—together with the Reformation debate on infant baptism and modern interlocutors (Rahner, Bunge, Wall, Miller-McLemore).[12] Biblical citations follow the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue).

The sectarian and temporal specificity of this source-base should be stated openly: The Islamic reading privileges the Sunnī exegetical mainstream together with the classical and contemporary Twelver Imāmī exegetical and ḥadīth traditions; the Christian reading privileges the Greek and Latin patristic mainstream, the Reformation debate where it bears directly on the child, and the modern Catholic and Protestant conversation. Other traditions (Ẓāhirī, Ismāʿīlī, Ṣūfī; Oriental Orthodox, Syriac, evangelical) are engaged only in passing.

Following Leonard Swidler's "Dialogue Decalogue," each text is read as its own community reads it, in the best light its interpreters give it, rather than adjudicated against the other.[13] The same rule binds the reading of each tradition's own history: Neither Christian nor Muslim accounts of the child are allowed to gain in luster by darkening a third tradition, and in particular the Jewish context of Jesus's teaching.

The Child in the Qur'an: Theological Foundations

Three Foundational Affirmations

The Qur'an speaks of children in a register that is simultaneously theological, legal, and pastoral. Three foundational affirmations organize its discourse. First, the child is a gift: "Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world" (Q 18:46). The classical exegetes read *zīnah* (adornment) here without irony—children are a real and legitimate joy of this life—but they also read the verse in the context of its continuation, which reminds the believer that "the enduring good deeds" outlast both wealth and children.[14] Children are gift, not possession; they are entrusted, not owned.

Second, the child is a trust (*amānah*) from God. The classical literature of *ādāb* makes this explicit. Ghazālī, opening his treatment of the rearing of children in the *Iḥyāʾ*, writes that "the child is a trust in the hands of his parents, and his pure heart is a precious jewel, empty of every engraving and image; but it is receptive of every engraving, and inclines to whatever

12 John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children*, trans. M. L. W. Laistner, in *Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire*, by M. L. W. Laistner (Cornell University Press, 1951), 75–122; Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), esp. books I–II; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 101 (on piety toward parents), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger, 1947); and Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor (Paedagogus)*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Hendrickson, 1994).

13 Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 1–4.

14 Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, 15:262–65 (on Q 18:46); and Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2:686–87.

it is inclined toward."[15] This trust-language does theological work; it locates parental authority within a prior divine authority, so that parents are stewards of a life not their own.

The Imāmī corpus states the same conviction in a grammar that is, for the purposes of this article, unusually apposite: not the grammar of parental duty alone, but that of the child's *ḥaqq*—the child's own claim upon the parent. Kulaynī devotes consecutive chapters of the *Kitāb al-ʿAqīqah* of *al-Kāfī* to the discipline of the child, the rights of children, and kindness toward them, so that in the earliest surviving Imāmī legal-ethical collection the child appears as the bearer of enumerated claims rather than as the passive object of paternal authority.[16]

The point is made most explicitly in the *Risālat al-Ḥuqūq* attributed to the fourth Imam, ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, which enumerates some fifty rights and assigns one of them to the child: The father is told that he is answerable for what has been placed in his charge—the child's good formation (*ḥusn al-adab*), his guidance toward his Lord, and his assistance in obedience to Him. The transmission of the treatise is not free of difficulty, and we do not rest any argument on its formal authentication; but its currency in the tradition is not in doubt, and the conceptual point it makes is the one that matters here. The language of *amānah* and the language of *ḥaqq* are two faces of a single claim: that the child's standing is prior to the parent's authority and is therefore a limit upon it.[17]

Third, and most consequentially, the killing of children is placed among the gravest of prohibitions: "Do not kill your children for fear of poverty—We provide for them and for you. Killing them is a great sin" (Q 17:31). And again, in the ethical decalogue of Q 6:151: "Do not kill your children because of poverty—We provide for you and for them." The classical exegetes read these verses against the pre-Islamic Arabian practice of female infanticide (*waʾd al-banāt*), which the Qurʾan condemns in the strongest terms elsewhere (Q 81:8–9: "when the infant girl buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed").[18] The prohibition of infanticide is not one commandment among others; it is one of the constitutive break-points between Qurʾanic ethics and its immediate historical context.

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15 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:72 (*Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs*, section on the rearing of children): "*al-ṣabī amānah ʿinda wālidayhi, wa-qalbuhu al-ṭāhir jawharah nafīsah sādhaja khāliyah ʿan kulli naqsh wa-ṣūrah, wa-huwa qābil li-kulli mā nuqisha wa-māʾil ilā kulli mā yumāl bihi ilayh*."

16 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 6, *Kitāb al-ʿAqīqah*, *bāb adab al-walad*, *bāb ḥuqūq al-awlād*, and *bāb birr al-awlād*. The arrangement is itself an argument; the discipline of the child is framed by, and answerable to, the child's own claims.

17 *Risālat al-Ḥuqūq*, attributed to ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, in Ibn Shuʿba al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf al-ʿUqūl ʿan Āl al-Rasūl*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, 2nd ed. (Muʾassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1404 AH), section *wa-ammā ḥaqq waladika*: "*wa-annaka masʾūlun ʿammā wullītahu min ḥusn al-adab wa-l-dalālah ʿalā rabbihi ʿazza wa-jall wa-l-maʿūnah lahu ʿalā ṭāʿatihi*" (my translation). The treatise is transmitted also in Ibn Bābawayh al-Ṣadūq, *al-Khiṣāl*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Jamāʿat al-Mudarrisīn, 1403 AH), and in his *Man Lā Yaḥḍuruhu al-Faqīh*; the recensions differ in wording.

18 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 5:81–83 (on Q 17:31); Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 20:200–202. On the pre-Islamic context, see Giladi, *Children of Islam*, 100–113.

From these three affirmations flows a substantial body of practical guidance. Breastfeeding is legislated at two years for those who wish to complete the term (Q 2:233); provision for the divorced woman nursing a child is required of the father (Q 65:6); a child's paternity is protected (Q 33:5, which regulates the naming of children after their biological fathers rather than after adoptive parents); and orphans are given a distinct legal-ethical status, to which we shall return (Q 4:2–6; Q 2:220; Q 89:17–20; Q 93:9).[19]

Parents in the Qur'an: The Frame of the Child's Rights

The Qur'an's teaching on children cannot be read apart from its portrait of parents, for it is largely through that portrait that the child's claims are framed. The portrait has three features.

First, the parent—above all the mother—is described as one who has given, and to whom gratitude is therefore due: "His mother bore him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning was in two years: give thanks to Me and to your parents" (Q 31:14; cf. Q 46:15, which counts pregnancy and weaning together as thirty months). The child's later duty of honor is thus grounded in the parent's prior care, and the care itself is described as a burden borne, not as a title acquired.

Second, the parental relation is expressly subordinated to the relation with God. The same passage continues: "But if they strive to make you associate with Me that of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them; yet keep them company in this world with kindness" (Q 31:15; cf. Q 29:8). Filial obedience is real but bounded, and the boundary is drawn by *tawḥīd*. The narrative portraits confirm the point from the parental side. Abraham prays for his descendants that they be kept from idolatry (Q 14:35–41; Q 2:128); Jacob, at the point of death, asks his sons not what they will inherit but "What will you worship after me?" (Q 2:133); and when Noah pleads for the son who perished in the flood, he is told that "he is not of your family" (*innahu laysa min ahlika*, Q 11:46)—kinship is not, of itself, the measure of belonging. In the reverse direction, the young Abraham admonishes his own father with conspicuous gentleness (Q 19:41–48); the child appears as a moral agent before God, not merely as the recipient of parental instruction.[20]

Third, the parent's duty is defined in terms of the child's ultimate good. "O you who believe, guard yourselves and your families against a Fire" (Q 66:6), and "enjoin prayer upon your family" (Q 20:132). Ibn Kathīr records ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib's gloss on the first verse—teach them and form them in good conduct—a reading that coincides with the father's charge of *ḥusn al-adab* in

19 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mīzān*, 2:242–52 (on Q 2:233 and the legal architecture of parental provision); and Hallaq, *Sharīʿa*, 275–83, on the classical *fiqh* of *ḥaḍāna* and *nafaqa*.

20 On Q 31:14–15, see Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mīzān*, 2:242–52, and Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*; on Q 11:45–46, Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*.

the *Risālat al-Ḥuqūq*.[21] The Qur'an can also name children as a trial (*fitnah*, Q 8:28; Q 64:15), precisely because love of them can draw a parent away from God; and it can model the believer's prayer for "spouses and offspring who are a comfort to our eyes" (Q 25:74).

Read together, these features yield the frame within which the Qur'an speaks of the child: Parental authority is real but derivative, filial honor is owed but limited, and both are measured by a prior relation to God. This frame is what makes the language of the child's *ḥaqq* intelligible. The child's claim is not a concession wrung from parental power; it is part of the order to which parental power itself answers.

Finally, and pastorally, the Qur'an records a father's advice to his son as a paradigm of religious pedagogy: the counsel of Luqmān in Q 31:12–19. Luqmān's counsel—enjoining the son to worship God alone, to honor his parents, to be moderate in his walking, to lower his voice, to be patient in adversity—has functioned in Muslim educational literature as something like a curriculum in one page.[22] It is significant that the verses on the mother's burden and the limit of filial obedience (Q 31:14–15) stand inside this very counsel; the Qur'an's model of instruction places the honor of parents and its subordination to God in a single breath.

The Child in Christian Scripture, Especially the New Testament: Theological Foundations

The Christian reading of the child does not begin with the Gospels. The Hebrew Bible, which the church received as its Scripture, already speaks of children as "a heritage from the LORD" (Ps 127:3), celebrates their birth as divine gift in the stories of Isaac and of Samuel (Gen 17–18; 1 Sam 1–2) and places the instruction of children at the heart of the covenant: "Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deut 6:7). Chrysostom himself, urging Christian parents to form their children in the faith, holds up Hannah's dedication of Samuel as the model to be imitated.[23]

The New Testament treatment of the child stands within this stream. Judith Gundry has argued that Mark, in particular, gives children a prominence that inverts conventional hierarchies of age and status.[24] That observation has sometimes been pressed into a contrast between Jesus and the Judaism

21 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, ad Q 66:6, citing ʿAlī: "*addibūhum, ʿallimūhum*."

22 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 25:135–58 (on Q 31:12–19); and for the pedagogical reception, Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:72–79.

23 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 21 (on Eph 6:1–4), trans. Gross Alexander, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 1, vol. 13, ed. Philip Schaff (Christian Literature Publishing, 1889).

24 Judith M. Gundry, "Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus' Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13–16) and the Purpose of Mark," in Bunge, Fretheim, and Gaventa, *Child in the Bible*, 143–76; and, for the ancient context, W. A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church* (Paternoster, 1996), 21–48.

from which he came, as though his welcome of children were a break with an indifferent or harsh tradition. The evidence does not support that contrast. As Bonnie Miller-McLemore has argued in this journal, Israel already regarded children as part of God's blessing, forbade the exposure and killing of infants that Greco-Roman practice tolerated, and included children in its worship and instruction; Jesus's welcome of them is, in her words, "the stream in which Jesus stands."[25] Gundry-Volf herself had noted that no contrast between Jesus's teaching and Judaism is necessarily implied in these passages.[26] With that caution in place, three passages carry the theological weight.

The first is the child as the paradigm of the disciple. When the disciples ask who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus calls a child, places the child among them, and says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3–4). Karl Rahner's "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" reads this saying as the New Testament's most consequential claim about the child—not that childhood is a preliminary stage to be discarded but that the receptive dependence characteristic of the child is the enduring form of every genuine relation to God.[27] Gundry reads the same sayings as reviving a strand of the prophetic tradition in which Israel itself is figured as a small child wholly dependent on divine mercy—again a continuity, not a rupture.[28]

The second passage is about the child as blessing. When people bring children to Jesus for a blessing and the disciples try to prevent them, Jesus rebukes the disciples and says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14; cf. Matt 19:13–15; Luke 18:15–17). The scene is a paradigm of the child's positive theological standing; the kingdom is theirs by receptive right, not by earned merit. Chrysostom, commenting on Matthew's version, reads the scene as a lesson in humility addressed to disciples who had turned the children away out of a concern for dignity, and he grounds it in a portrait of the infant soul as "pure from all the passions."[29] His reading is ecclesial and moral rather than polemical; the contrast he draws is between the child and the adult desire for honor, not between Jesus and his people.

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25 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Jesus Loves the Little Children? An Exercise in the Use of Scripture," *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 1, no. 7 (October 2010): 10; see also 3–5 and 16–17 on the anti-Jewish consequences of exaggerating the novelty of Jesus's stance.

26 Miller-McLemore, "Jesus Loves the Little Children?," 12, discussing Judith Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," in Bunge, Fretheim, and Gaventa, *Child in the Bible*, 29–60.

27 Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 33–50.

28 Gundry, "Children in the Gospel of Mark," 171–72, as discussed in Miller-McLemore, "Jesus Loves the Little Children?," 15.

29 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 62.4 (on Matt 19:13–15), trans. George Prevost, rev. M. B. Riddle, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 1, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff (Christian Literature Publishing, 1888).

The third passage is the apostolic instruction to parents. The household codes of Ephesians and Colossians articulate a reciprocal ethic that binds children and parents in mutual obligation: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—this is the first commandment with a promise. ... And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:1–4). Colossians is briefer but pointed: "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will lose heart" (Col 3:21). The commandment Paul cites is itself the Torah's (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16)—the household code takes up, rather than replaces, Israel's ethic of the family. Chrysostom's *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children* remains the most sustained patristic treatment of these instructions. He likens parents to artists shaping a sculpture—"so we must care for these wondrous statues of ours"—and the image recurs in his homily on Ephesians 6, where the parent who forms a child in virtue is said to adorn the image of the King of Kings.[30]

The apostolic instruction to fathers deserves emphasis: "Do not provoke your children to anger" (Eph 6:4); "Do not embitter your children, or they will lose heart" (Col 3:21). These are not throwaway lines but limits on paternal authority, and the patristic tradition read them as such. Chrysostom glosses the provocation as treating children "overbearingly, not as free, but as slaves," and observes that Paul does not command fathers to love their children, because nature already does so; what must be commanded is the form that love takes.[31] Augustine's *Confessions*, with its haunting recollection of Augustine's own boyhood beatings at the hands of teachers and the amusement of his parents, is among the earliest sustained works of Christian self-scrutiny concerning what adults do to children.[32]

Points of Practical Convergence

Five substantive convergences between the two scriptures on the child-parent relation deserve emphasis.

The Child as Gift and Trust

Both traditions refuse to treat the child as property. The Qur'anic language of *amānah* (trust), most sharply articulated by Ghazālī but resting on the Qur'anic characterization of children as a divine gift (Q 42:49–50), is closely paralleled by Christian Scripture's insistence that children are received as a blessing (Ps 127:3; Mark 10:14) whose theological weight forbids their

30 Chrysostom, *On Vainglory* §22, in Laistner, *Christianity and Pagan Culture*; and Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 21. On Chrysostom's theology of parenthood, see Vigen Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children," in Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 61–77.

31 Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 21 (on Eph 6:4).

32 Augustine, *Confessions* I.9.14–15, trans. Chadwick, 11–12. For Augustine's account of childhood, see Martha Ellen Stortz, "'Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?': Augustine on Childhood," in Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 78–102.

instrumentalization. Calvin, commenting on Psalm 127, warned that those who do not regard their children as God's gift will be careless in providing for them—an argument from gift to duty that Ghazālī would have recognized. Both traditions locate parental authority within a prior divine authority; both traditions accordingly limit it.[33]

The Duty of Provision and Education

Both traditions place a positive duty on parents—especially fathers—to provide materially and educationally for their children. The Qur'an enjoins provision for the child during nursing and afterward (Q 2:233; Q 65:6), and the classical *fiqh* developed the doctrine of *nafaqa* (maintenance) into a detailed body of law.[34] The Imāmī *Risālat al-Ḥuqūq*, as noted above, names the father's educational charge explicitly. On the Christian side, the duty of instruction is first of all the Torah's (Deut 6:7; cf. Prov 22:6), and the early church carried it forward: The *Didache* bids parents not to withhold their hand from son or daughter but to teach them the fear of God from their youth.[35] The clearest New Testament statement of material provision is Paul's aside that "children ought not to save up for their parents but parents for their children" (2 Cor 12:14); "Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4) supplies the educational counterpart. The more frequently cited 1 Timothy 5:8 concerns the support of relatives—in context, widowed mothers and grandmothers (5:4)—and is better read as a general family obligation than as a text about children specifically. Aquinas builds directly on 2 Corinthians 12:14: Because the father is the principle of the son's being, "it is essentially fitting for a father to support his son," and "not only for a time, but for all his life."[36] Chrysostom presses the priority of the educational duty still further: "Let everything be secondary with us to the provident care we should take of our children."[37]

The Prohibition of Cruelty

Both traditions place substantive limits on what parents may do to their children. The Qur'anic prohibition of infanticide (Q 17:31; Q 6:151; Q 81:8–9) is the most emphatic imaginable case; the *fiqh* literature extends the underlying protective logic into the classical law of custody and maintenance.[38] The Hebrew Bible's condemnation of child sacrifice (Lev 18:21; Jer 7:31) is the nearest biblical analogue, and, as noted above, Israel's

33 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 3:72; Terence E. Fretheim, "God Was with the Boy (Genesis 21:20): Children in the Book of Genesis," in Bunge, Fretheim, and Gaventa, *Child in the Bible*, 3–23; and, on Calvin, Barbara Pitkin, "'The Heritage of the Lord': Children in the Theology of John Calvin," in Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 160–93; cf. Miller-McLemore, "Jesus Loves the Little Children?," 9.

34 Hallaq, *Sharī'a*, 275–83; and Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, 165–86.

35 Didache 4.9, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Harvard University Press, 2003), vol. 1.

36 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 101, a. 2, ad 2.

37 Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 21.

38 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 5:81–83 (on Q 17:31) and 8:339–41 (on Q 81:8–9); Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 24:245–48.

rejection of infant exposure set it apart from its Greco-Roman neighbors. The New Testament's parallel is quieter but no less significant: The apostolic injunction not to "provoke" or "embitter" children (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21) sets a floor beneath which parental authority ceases to be authority and becomes abuse. The patristic reception developed these injunctions into a serious ethical tradition: Chrysostom's reading of Ephesians 6:4 as a prohibition of treating children as slaves, his counsel in *On Vainglory* that a child should fear the rod without being constantly subjected to it, and Augustine's rueful self-scrutiny in the *Confessions*.[39]

Reciprocal Honor: Birr al-Wālidayn and "Honor Your Father and Mother"

Perhaps the closest textual convergence lies in the reciprocal command that children honor their parents. The Qurʾanic locus classicus is Q 17:23–24: "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be good (*iḥsānan*) to parents. If one or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of contempt (*uff*), nor rebuff them, but speak to them a gracious word. And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy, and say: My Lord, have mercy on them, as they raised me when I was small."[40] The parallel biblical command belongs first to the Hebrew Bible: the fifth commandment of the Decalogue—"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16)—and its Levitical restatement, which bids each Israelite to revere mother and father and, notably, names the mother first (Lev 19:3). The New Testament receives the command rather than originating it; Jesus invokes it against those who would evade the support of parents (Matt 15:4–6; Mark 7:10), and Paul reissues it as "the first commandment with a promise" (Eph 6:2).

The parallel between *birr al-wālidayn* and the Fifth Commandment is not incidental. Both frame the child's obligation to the parent not as a legal debt to be discharged but as a lifelong disposition of honor that continues after the child is grown. The Qurʾanic pairing of this obligation with the worship of God alone—repeated at Q 4:36, Q 2:83, Q 6:151, Q 46:15, Q 29:8, and Q 31:14–15—makes it arguably the second most repeated ethical command in the text after the command to worship God. The Decalogue preserves the same structural pairing: Its first commandments concern God, the fifth concerns parents, and the remainder concern the neighbor. Both traditions also bound the obligation in the same way. As Q 31:15 forbids

39 Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 21; Chrysostom, *On Vainglory* §30; Augustine, *Confessions* I.9.14–15.

40 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 20:184–91 (on Q 17:23–24), reading the prohibition against saying *uff* as the outer limit of an ethic whose interior is limitless respect; and Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mīzān*, 13:81–86, extending the interpretation.

obedience to parents who command idolatry, so Paul's "in the Lord" (Eph 6:1) was read by Chrysostom as limiting filial obedience to what does not offend God—"wherever you will not be offending against God."[41]

The weight of the theme in Islamic sources can be measured also by its eschatological use. In the report known as the ḥadīth of Gabriel, among the portents of the Hour is "that the slave-woman give birth to her mistress" (*an talida al-amatu rabbatahā*). The wording concerns the slave woman and her offspring rather than children and parents as such, but one line of classical commentary, recorded by al-Nawawī among several readings, takes it as an image of a time when children will treat their mothers as an owner treats a servant—an inversion that presupposes filial honor as part of the moral order whose collapse signals the end.[42] The Imāmī corpus expresses the same gravity juridically and ethically: *al-Kāfī* devotes one chapter to kindness to parents (*bāb al-birr bi-l-wālidayn*) and another to filial undutifulness (*bāb al-ʿuqūq*), the latter counted among the grave sins.[43]

Special Protection of the Orphan

Both scriptures single out the orphan (*yatīm* in Arabic; *orphanos* in the New Testament, extending the older Hebrew *yātôm*) for particular protection. The Qurʾan returns to the theme repeatedly: "Give orphans their property; do not exchange the bad for the good; and do not consume their property along with your own—that is a great sin" (Q 4:2); "Do not go near the property of the orphan, except in the best way, until he reaches maturity" (Q 6:152; Q 17:34); "As for the orphan, do not oppress him" (Q 93:9). The Prophet himself was an orphan, and the tradition preserves the saying: "I and the guardian of an orphan are like these two in Paradise"—the Prophet joining his index and middle fingers as he said it.[44]

The New Testament inherits and affirms the Hebrew Bible's insistence on the special standing of the orphan (Exod 22:22; Deut 10:18; Ps 68:5; Isa 1:17): "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (Jas 1:27). The early church's institutional care for orphans—attested in Justin Martyr's description of the Sunday collection and in the emergence of dedicated houses for orphans in the fourth-century East—was among its most distinctive social practices, and one that the surrounding society

41 Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 21 (on Eph 6:1).

42 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Īmān*, no. 8; cf. Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Īmān*, no. 50 (*rabbahā*); Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāj Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj*, 2nd ed. (Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1392 AH), commentary on *Kitāb al-Īmān*, no. 8.

43 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, *Kitāb al-Īmān wa-l-Kufr*, *bāb al-birr bi-l-wālidayn* and *bāb al-ʿuqūq*.

44 Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Adab*, no. 6005 ("*anā wa-kāfilu al-yatīm fī al-jannah hākadhā*"); and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 2:207–19 (on Q 4:2), which develops the classical legal and ethical structure of guardianship of orphaned property.

noticed.[45] Both traditions have taken the ethical measure of a society by how it treats those without natural parents, and both have institutionalized that concern in ways that a comparative reading is well positioned to notice.

Points of Practical and Structural Divergence

Honest comparison must equally name the places where the two traditions diverge. Four differences of substance and structure deserve treatment.

Birth, Fiṭrah, and Baptism

The two traditions disagree, importantly, about the ritual and theological entry of the child into the community of faith. Qur'anic anthropology holds that every child is born in a state of *fiṭrah*—the primordial God-oriented constitution—and the well-known ḥadīth adds that "every child is born upon the *fiṭrah*, and it is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian."[46] The theological consequence is significant: On this reading, the child does not need to be inducted into a saving relation with God, because the child begins in one. The Muslim practices of the *adhān* whispered in the newborn's ear and the *ʿaqīqah* on the seventh day mark and welcome, but do not create, the child's standing before God.

It is worth registering that this anthropology is not the property of a single Islamic school. The *fiṭrah* report is received in the Imāmī corpus as well—Kulaynī places a chapter on the creation of humankind upon *tawḥīd* in his *Kitāb al-Īmān wa-l-Kufr*—and the classical Imāmī exegetes read Q 30:30 in the same direction as their Sunnī counterparts. The contrast drawn here is therefore a contrast between an Islamic and a Christian anthropology, not an artifact of sectarian selection.[47]

The classical Christian doctrine of baptism, and especially the doctrine of infant baptism as consolidated by Augustine against the Pelagians, presses in a different direction. On the Augustinian reading of the Fall, the child is born into a condition of inherited disorientation that baptism heals; the infant is baptized not as an initiation into a community of adult confession but as the sacramental means by which the child is grafted into the life of grace.[48]

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45 Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Hendrickson, 1994); and, for the fourth-century development, Peregrine Horden, *Hospitals and Healing from Antiquity to the Later Middle Ages* (Ashgate, 2008), 3–24.

46 Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Janāʾiz*, no. 1358; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Qadar*, no. 2658. For the exegetical elaboration, see Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mīzān*, 16:178–83; and on the concept of *fiṭrah* more broadly, Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *Fiṭrat* (Ṣadrā, 1370 SH/1991), 22–41.

47 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, *Kitāb al-Īmān wa-l-Kufr*, *bāb fiṭrat al-khalq ʿalā al-tawḥīd*; Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, ad Q 30:30; and Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, ad Q 30:30.

48 Augustine, *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione*, in *Answer to the Pelagians*, I, trans. Roland J. Teske, Works of Saint Augustine I/23 (New City Press, 1997), I.9.10, I.27.40; and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th rev. ed. (Continuum, 2000), 344–74.

The Reformation complicated this picture in two directions, and both bring parts of the Christian tradition closer to the Qur'anic position than where Augustine stands. The Reformed tradition retained infant baptism but relocated its ground: For Calvin, the children of believers belong to the covenant by God's promise, and baptism seals a standing the promise already confers; the Westminster Confession accordingly holds that grace and salvation "are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it."[49] The Anabaptist tradition went further, restricting baptism to those who have "learned repentance" and request it for themselves—thus expressly excluding infants; Menno Simons insisted that forgiveness is obtained through Christ "and not through baptism, whether we are children or believers."[50] On both accounts, though for different reasons, the infant's standing before God rests on divine promise rather than on a rite administered by adults. Neither, however, coincides with the Qur'anic view. The Reformed tradition ground the child's standing in the covenant of believing parents, and the Anabaptists in Christ's redemption applied to those not yet accountable; the Qur'an locates it in the created constitution of every child as such, whatever the faith of the parents.

The two grammars are not reconcilable by a simple move, and honest dialogue does not require them to be. What they share must be stated precisely. On the Augustinian view, the child's standing is conferred through an act performed by others—parents who present the child, a minister who baptizes, a church that receives—so it cannot be called independent of adult agency. What it is independent of is the child's own decision—neither the baptized infant nor the Qur'anic newborn must first choose in order to stand before God. That is the convergence, and it is real; its limit is that in one case the standing is mediated by the church's sacramental act, and in the other it is given with creation itself. On the credobaptist side the convergence is closer still, since the child's standing there rests on no human act at all. All these positions put the traditions at some distance from modern accounts that treat children as ethically "pre-persons."

Adoption, Lineage, and the Q 33:4–5 Reform

The two traditions diverge structurally on adoption. Classical Islamic law, on the reading of Q 33:4–5, prohibits *tabannī* in the sense of a legal fiction that would rename the adopted child as the biological offspring of the adopting family: "nor has He made your adopted sons your sons. ... Call them by their fathers' names: that is more just in the sight of God" (Q 33:4–5). The

49 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Westminster, 1960), IV.16; Pitkin, "'The Heritage of the Lord,'" 160–93; and The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), chap. 28, art. 5, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Harper & Brothers, 1877).

50 *The Schleitheim Confession*, trans. and ed. John H. Yoder (Herald Press, 1977), art. 1; and Menno Simons, *The Complete Works of Menno Simon* (John F. Funk and Brother, 1871), 1:32.

occasion of this ruling—the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, the divorced wife of his former adopted son Zayd—is much discussed by the classical exegetes, but the ruling's practical purpose is clear: The biological lineage of the child is to be preserved as a matter of both inheritance and identity.[51] Islamic law substitutes *kafāla*—sponsorship, guardianship, or fosterage—for legal adoption; the child is cared for as a member of the household but retains his or her biological name and lineage.

The Christian tradition took a substantially different path. Adoption is one of the central metaphors of Pauline soteriology (Rom 8:15, 23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5), and the metaphor gradually shaped Christian legal practice toward an embrace of adoption as a full legal act. Roman civil law's practice of *adoptio*, already available to the early Christians, was received, adapted, and transmitted through the medieval Latin West; modern Western legal systems' expansive practice of adoption is downstream of that reception.[52] This is a genuine structural difference. But the ethical convergence—that a child without natural parents deserves loving stewardship by adults who take responsibility—is arguably deeper than the legal divergence. The Islamic institution of *kafāla* and the Christian institution of adoption are two solutions to the same problem.

Inheritance and Patrimony

The two traditions diverge substantially on the child's inheritance rights. The Qur'an legislates a detailed distributive scheme (Q 4:11–12; Q 4:176) that gives children—sons and daughters both—a specified share of the parent's estate: "God commands you concerning your children: to the male, the like of the portion of two females" (Q 4:11). The classical *fiqh* built these fixed shares (*farā'iḍ*) into an elaborate system of compulsory inheritance.[53] The child's share is not a matter of parental discretion but a matter of divine command; parents may not disinherit their children as an act of will.

An intra-Islamic divergence deserves notice at this point, because it bears directly on the child's protection and because a comparison that noticed only the Sunnī scheme would misdescribe the Islamic position. Imāmī succession law departs from the Sunnī schemes precisely where the child's claim is at stake; it does not admit *taʿṣīb*, the devolution of the residue upon the male agnates of the wider family, applying instead the doctrine of *radd*, by which the residue returns proportionately to the Qur'anic heirs. The practical

51 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 25:191–200 (on Q 33:4–5); Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 6:377–83. On the legal consequences, see Hallaq, *Sharīʿa*, 293–95; and Ingrid Mattson, "Adoption and Fostering," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, vol. 2, ed. Suad Joseph (Brill, 2005), 3–5.

52 Trevor Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (IVP Academic, 2006), 22–46; and, for the historical development of adoption law in the Christian West, Kristin Elizabeth Gager, *Blood Ties and Fictive Ties: Adoption and Family Life in Early Modern France* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 8–35.

53 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 9:196–216 (on Q 4:11–12); and, for the classical legal architecture, N. J. Coulson, *Succession in the Muslim Family* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 29–65.

consequence is considerable. In Imāmī law, a daughter who is her parents' only surviving child takes the whole of the estate remaining after any spousal share; under the Sunnī schemes, where agnatic collaterals survive, she takes the Qur'anic half, and the remainder passes outward to them. On this specific question the Imāmī system is the more consistently child-centered of the two, and the divergence is a reminder that "the Islamic position" on the child's patrimony is itself a plural one.[54]

On the Christian side, the inheritance texts of Christian Scripture belong to the Hebrew Bible, and they are closer to the Qur'an than the New Testament's silence would suggest. The Torah treats the patrimony as passing to children by law rather than by paternal preference—a father may not transfer the firstborn's double portion from the son of a disfavored wife to the son of a favored one (Deut 21:15–17). In the case of Zelophehad's daughters, the law is extended so that daughters inherit where there is no son: "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter" (Num 27:8; cf. Num 27:1–11; 36:1–12). The Wisdom literature makes provision across generations a mark of righteousness: "The good leave an inheritance to their children's children" (Prov 13:22). The structural parallel with the Imāmī treatment of the only daughter is striking, even though the Torah still prefers sons where they exist. The New Testament, by contrast, contains no inheritance legislation, and Jesus explicitly declines to arbitrate a dispute over an estate (Luke 12:13–14). Mainstream Christian legal traditions have accordingly treated the distribution of the estate largely as a matter of testamentary freedom—with important limits, developed in the civil-law tradition and known as "forced heirship" or "legitim," that in some Christian-influenced legal systems (Louisiana, Scotland, much of continental Europe) require a portion of the estate to pass to the children.[55] The underlying moral convergence—that a parent has real obligations to a child that extend beyond life—is strong; the legal divergence in how those obligations are institutionalized is real. Comparative work on inheritance is arguably one of the most productive sites for Muslim-Christian legal-ethical dialogue in the present.

Discipline: The Limits of Parental Authority

Both traditions authorize parental discipline; both traditions place limits on it. The limits differ. The Qur'an does not explicitly legislate corporal punishment of children. The well-known Prophetic report on the age at which children begin to be reminded of prayer, cited in the *Sunan* literature,

54 Coulson, *Succession in the Muslim Family*, 108–34 (on inheritance in Shīʿī law), esp. 108–20 on the rejection of *taʿṣīb* and the operation of *radd*; and, for the exegetical basis of the Imāmī reading, Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, and Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, ad Q 4:11–12.

55 For a comparative treatment of forced heirship, see Kenneth G. C. Reid, Marius J. de Waal, and Reinhard Zimmermann, eds., *Comparative Succession Law*, vol. 3, *Mandatory Family Protection* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 3–24; and, on the Islamic system's structural features, David S. Powers, *Studies in Qur'an and Ḥadīth: The Formation of the Islamic Law of Inheritance* (University of California Press, 1986), 1–19.

mentions light physical prompting at a specified age but with substantial juristic caveats regarding harm, motivation, and marks.[56] The classical literature of *ādāb*—Ghazālī's discussion is representative—is emphatic that the deepest formation of the child is by example and gentle instruction, and that harsh treatment defeats its own purpose by embittering rather than forming.[57]

Christian Scripture holds two strands together here. The Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible endorses corporal correction—"those who spare the rod hate their children" (Prov 13:24; cf. 23:13–14; 29:15)—while the New Testament does not repeat that endorsement and instead twice prohibits provoking children to anger (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21). Christian pedagogical practice has historically wavered between these poles—sometimes citing Proverbs, sometimes citing the apostolic epistles—and Chrysostom already sought a middle course, allowing the fear of punishment while warning against its constant use.[58] The modern Christian consensus has moved substantially in the direction of the apostolic limits, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, along with most modern Protestant statements, now emphasizes patient formation over corporal correction.[59] The comparative reading, then, is not that one tradition permits and the other prohibits corporal discipline—both have historically permitted it under some conditions and prohibited it under others—but that both have developed substantial ethical resources for limiting the harm that adult power can do to children and that these resources are increasingly convergent in the contemporary setting.

Implications for Muslim–Christian Dialogue

Three observations follow from the comparative reading. First, the child-parent relation is a particularly hospitable site for Muslim-Christian dialogue, because it is universal, daily, and immediately intelligible across the confessional line. But the reason it is hospitable is not that Muslim and Christian parents set their faith aside when they speak as parents. Both traditions teach the opposite—tthat the parental relation is held within a prior relation to God. The Qur'an bounds even the honor owed to parents by the worship owed to God (Q 31:15; Q 29:8), and the Gospels can make discipleship relativize the bonds of family (Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26)—texts that, as Miller-McLemore reminds Christian readers, complicate any easy

56 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh*, no. 495; on the classical juristic elaboration of the conditions under which any physical discipline is permissible and the many under which it is prohibited, see Giladi, *Children of Islam*, 51–70.

57 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 3:72–79.

58 Chrysostom, *On Vainglory* §30.

59 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §§2221–31; and Don S. Browning and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds., *Children and Childhood in American Religions* (Rutgers University Press, 2009), 1–20.

appeal to Jesus as the friend of children.[60] A Muslim parent and a Christian parent worried about the moral formation of a teenager speak first as religious persons for whom parenthood is itself a stewardship under God. What they share is not a neutral parental register beneath their religious identities but a religiously formed understanding of parenthood, and it is that shared theological form, rather than a secular common denominator, that makes the conversation possible. That common register—as Marcia Bunge, John Wall, and Avner Giladi have each argued in their respective fields—has been underutilized as a dialogical starting point.[61]

Second, the shared ethical language of the two traditions—child as trust, provision as obligation, cruelty as forbidden, orphan as protected—is arguably more robust than the standard theological catalogs of Muslim-Christian difference suggest. Every one of these commitments has substantial and textually anchored purchase in both scriptures. On the Christian side, several of them are anchored as firmly in the Hebrew Bible as in the New Testament, which is itself a reminder that a comparison of this kind involves a third tradition, Judaism, whose voice it should not appropriate or obscure. Every one of them is subject to erosion under the pressures of consumer modernity, and every one of them is a resource that Muslims and Christians could jointly articulate more effectively than either can alone. Miller-McLemore's warning against a Christian "monopoly" on the love of children applies with equal force to Muslims; neither community honors children by claiming to be the only one that does.[62]

Third, the divergences—baptism and *fiṭrah*, adoption and *kafāla*, fixed shares and testamentary freedom, the limits of discipline—are not obstacles to dialogue but its raw material. The 2007 open letter *A Common Word Between Us and You* sought common ground in the twin commandments of love of God and love of neighbor without pretending that the theological differences between Muslims and Christians had dissolved.[63] The subject of the child is unusually well suited to that disciplined middle course, because the practical questions—How does one form a child in the fear of God without breaking the child's spirit?—are common enough to allow the theological differences to be named without being weaponized.

60 Miller-McLemore, "Jesus Loves the Little Children?," 18–24.

61 Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 1–28; Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 1–17; Giladi, *Children of Islam*, 1–19.

62 Miller-McLemore, "Jesus Loves the Little Children?," 25.

63 *A Common Word Between Us and You* (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), reprinted in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (Eerdmans, 2010), 28–50; and, for the parallel Catholic-Muslim initiative, Pope Francis and Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (Abu Dhabi, February 4, 2019).

Conclusion

This article has argued that Christian Scripture, with the New Testament at its center, and the Qur'an, read through their most influential interpretive traditions, share a substantial ethical vision of the child-parent relation. Both refuse to treat the child as property; both place substantive positive duties of provision and education on parents; both prohibit cruelty; both make honor of parents a paradigmatic obligation of children; both single out the orphan for particular protection. Both, moreover, frame all of these within a prior relation to God that bounds parental authority and filial obedience alike. Both also differ, in ways that honest comparison must name: on the ritual and theological entry of the child into the community of faith, on the legal architecture of adoption and lineage, on the distribution of the estate, and on the shape of parental discipline. Several of these differences, it has emerged, do not run neatly between "Islam" and "Christianity"; the Imāmī law of inheritance and the Reformed and Anabaptist accounts of the unbaptized child each move their own tradition closer to the other, and much of what Christians and Muslims share on the child they share also with the Hebrew Bible.

The convergences and the divergences alike belong to the same shared conversation. The universality and daily immediacy of the child-parent relation make it, as this article has attempted to show, a particularly hospitable site for the kind of dialogue that neither dissolves theological difference nor treats it as adversarial. If Muslim and Christian scholars can learn to read their scriptures on the child together, the theological differences among them become clarifying rather than dividing, and the ethical convergences become resources rather than platitudes. The children whose formation both traditions urgently care about are, in the end, the reason the conversation is worth having at all.

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