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Children-Where Religion Hits the Road

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Abstract: An astonishing story in the Talmud recounts that infants in the womb learn the entire Torah but that when an angel strikes them directly above the mouth during birth, exhaustive knowledge of the divine is lost. The doctrines raised the spiritual status of childhood and supported ministries to all children, regardless of class and social status. Fresh understandings of children and child rearing in religion offer moral and spiritual insights that many secular approaches overlook.

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WHY SOCIETY NEEDS RELIGIOUS VIEWS OF CHILDREN

A REINVENTION OF CHILDhood is under way. Previous understandings inherited from Christianity and the Enlightenment-children as depraved or innocent, for example-no longer completely fit. New controlling images suggested by politics, popular psychology and the market-children as victims or children as consumers, products or burdens-are inadequate and sometimes outright destructive. Meanwhile, dramatic changes in families, gender, neighborhoods, community and employment raise new questions about how to care for children and how to involve them in society. How should we rightfully view children in this period of transition? What better time for those in religious communities to speak up? Unstable views of children leave society in need of richer understandings often best nurtured within long-standing traditions. Unfortunately, when people hear religious attitudes toward children mentioned, they often automatically assume we're talking about the Christian Right and its adamancy about children's submission to adult authority. Others think, with justified cynicism, about child abuse within Catholic and Protestant churches and homes.

Truncating what religious traditions offer in these ways has greatly limited our outlook. There is much more to children in general, and much more wisdom about children in Christianity and beyond, than is conveyed in talk of the will to discipline them or of their mistreatment by those with power. A rich bounty lies in many religious traditions, largely untapped and unappreciated. Sometimes those within these traditions do not fully grasp their significance.

An astonishing story in the Talmud recounts that infants in the womb learn the entire Torah but that when an angel strikes them directly above the mouth during birth, exhaustive knowledge of the divine is lost. The philtrum, the indentation below the nose, remains as a mark of God's love.

From the beginning of life, in other words, children are participants at the center of Judaism, not bystanders. This is nowhere more evident, says rabbi and children's author Sandy Sasso, than in the core narrative of the Exodus and the rituals reenacting its message of liberation. Passover cannot begin or end without children. They ask the questions with which the celebration starts and their search for the hidden matzo, the afikoman, brings it to a close. In some families, it is also customary for a child to open the door for the prophet Elijah, announcing the coming of the Messiah. The child "opens the door to the promise of redemption," Sasso says. "Without the child, the community cannot discover what makes it whole."

It should be no surprise that Jesus, a Jew, welcomed children and proclaimed them bearers of the kingdom, worthy of emulation and needing our touch, as recounted in the Synoptic Gospels. Christians trivialize the radicalism of this view when they reduce his mandate to become like children to an aspiration to become simple, pure, spontaneous and without anxiety. Jesus did not have these romanticized ideas in mind at all. Rather, as recent biblical theologians stress, he recognized the economic and political marginality of the

children of his time and lifted them up as emblematic of the most vulnerable among us, needing our care and exemplifying the site where God's grace enters the world. If people today realized that to call children gifts, in Christian terms, meant to bear full responsibility for their welfare, they might hesitate to do so as blithely. "Jesus did not just teach how to make an adult world kinder and more just for children," New Testament scholar Judith Gundry-Volf points out. "He taught the arrival of a social world in part defined by and organized around children." With children, as in other places, Jesus and his followers sought to turn the everyday world upside down.

These Jewish and Christian traditions contain ideas that depart strikingly from a common conservative view of discipline—that a child must learn to submit to the parent and to God the Father. Judaism expects children to honor parents but never says they must agree with or even necessarily obey them. Rather than formulaic confession and compliance, Judaism relies on debate and disputation, on which its vitality rests. The practice has implications both for the relationships between children and adults and for those between people and God. Faith involves inquiry. In the Passover ritual, the child asks questions. Questions "elicit not a single, absolute answer, but a story," in Sasso's words. The Talmud itself is one set of arguments after another.

For Christians, seeing children as God's special favor should temper adult abuse of authority. At the heart of discipline lies discipleship. Disciples follow Jesus because of mutual love, trust, belief and admiration, not fear and conformity. So also should Christian discipline invite rather than force. Jesus' authority rests upon befriending his disciples rather than standing over them as commander and chief.

As 20th century psychologist Bruno Bettelheim wrote of child rearing, the "fundamental issue is not punishment at all but...the creation of conditions that not only allow but strongly induce a child to wish to be a moral, disciplined person." The demand for obedience should be coupled with convictions about children as gifts more than with ideas of sin and punishment. Leaders commonly associated with Christian doctrines of sin, such as Augustine, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, did not use those doctrines to justify corporal punishment. Instead, such doctrines leveled the playing field between adults and children and between rich and poor, all sinners alike. The doctrines raised the spiritual status of childhood and supported ministries to all children, regardless of class and social status.

If such surprises come from traditions with which Americans believe they are familiar, imagine what awaits us in other religions.

Buddhism's diverse tradition is rarely associated with children and strongly linked to asceticism and monastic life. Relatively new to North Americans, its intricate practices and thought system seem to require a mastery that only adults can pursue. The details of family, it would seem, just distract. Buddhism's founder, Siddhartha himself, called his newborn son Rahula, or "fetter," before he abandoned him entirely to depart on his own spiritual quest.

Yet Buddhism makes important claims about children that contest contemporary market assumptions.

Nonmonastic converts in the United States are just beginning to claim its relevance to family life. Children, they say, are not just a mix of nature and nurture—the backbone theory of much contemporary social science—but come to parents through powerful yearnings of karmic energy or as the upshot of past actions. If one is born, one chose in some fashion one's birth. This relieves parents of the weighty guilt over how individual children turn out that Western psychology has deepened and perpetuated. As Buddhist scholar Rita Gross notes, a child has "its own heritage, independent of what it may receive from particular parents."

Children in Buddhism, then, are not possessions, and parents do not have the right to imprint their beliefs on them. Although children can be ignorant, they can also exemplify a sought-after state of open, nondogmatic attention. One Tibetan Buddhist text instructs, "Rest in meditation without grasping...just like a small child gazing at a shrine hall." True family consists of spiritual mentors and fellow practitioners, not just biological ancestors and progeny. Children can begin training as early as 7, and monastic Buddhist communities in Asia often resemble extended families made up of people of all ages.

In the United States there is not the same division of spiritual labor between monasticism and householding as in Asian Buddhism. Consequently, in recent years, converts have sought new ways to connect faith practices and family. Books like *Buddhism for Mothers* by Sarah Naphali and *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* by Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn translate Buddhist principles for domestic life. In the latter text, the authors take the ideal of mindfulness into the daily activity of the home. Children are born with "sovereignty," meaning intrinsic goodness, or an "incarnation of what is most sacred in life." Parenting is a spiritual discipline akin to monastic training.

Native American belief encompasses a broad diversity across several hundred nations, but one idea about children seems common among many tribes: Children are not to be hit. Behind this restraint lies a conviction about the goodness and sacredness of children. Native Americans' resistance to corporal punishment raised grave concern in early missionaries, who arrived with quite different views. A record of Jesuit missionary experience in Canada from the 17th century declared, "They treat their children with wonderful affection, but they preserve no discipline, for they neither themselves correct them nor allow others to do so." Instead, adults would do no more than ask children to stop when they were doing something wrong. This approach still prevails. A member of the Oglala Lakota of western South Dakota interviewed by Roger Iron Cloud puts it this way: "Nothing is forced; there is no doctrine, no extremism, no proselytizing, nothing compulsory...about religion."

The encounters between European missionaries and native peoples in America illustrate how religious attitudes toward children take many forms and are used to justify treating children in sometimes completely opposite manners. This sampling reminds us to reconsider our unquestioned religious assumptions and notice how they blind us to other ways of understanding children.

In the reinvention of childhood that is under way, religion has a key role to play. Fresh understandings of children and child rearing in religion offer moral and spiritual insights that many secular approaches overlook. Conversely, children offer a window into how religion functions-where religion hits the road.

By natural proclivity and market incentive, adults often use children to further their own ends. Religious traditions often promote more generative attitudes toward, and practices with, children. They can offer a traditional, countercultural view of children's inherent worth that needs to be retrieved and given voice. They often give children a sacred place, described in a variety of ways, and embody in children a goal of being fully in, but not wholly of, the world. Children know the sacred, from their place on the margin, in ways distinct from those of adults. Children's religious knowledge does not depend on obedience to a divine paternal authority. Adults can learn from them.

Sidebar

Native American belief encompasses a broad diversity across several hundred nations, underscored by a conviction about the goodness and sacredness of children.

Sidebar

Buddhism makes important claims about children that contest contemporary market assumptions.

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Rather than formulaic confession and compliance, Judaism relies on debate and disputation, on which its vitality rests.

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