

The Rod of Discipline: Masochism, Sadism, and the Judeo- Christian Religion

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ABSTRACT: Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the scenario where a person, often a child, is being beaten by a parent, an authority figure, or even God, is often found. This essay searches for an explanation for this phenomenon by combining Sigmund Freud's thoughts on the masochism of the Oedipus complex and Martin Bergmann's belief that Western religion was impacted by the sadism of the Laius and Jocasta Complexes. The paper argues that, within the section of the Judeo-Christian tradition that sanctions the physical abuse of children, sadism and masochism find the perfect marriage.

KEY WORDS: Sigmund Freud; Martin Bergmann; physical abuse; sadism; masochism.

*Introduction*¹

A basic premise in Regina Schwartz's book, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (1997), is that the biblical legacy of monotheism is responsible for a whole laundry list of western civilization's historical and modern sins: exclusivism, authoritarianism, intolerance, misogyny, ill treatment of minorities, xenophobic nationalism, fundamentalism, patriarchy, and in general, violence against the *Other*.² In her book, Schwartz joins a chorus of voices that exposes the historical and ongoing fact of violence and abuse sanctioned by Judaism and Christianity. Her main thesis is that religious violence—as violence sanctioned by Judaism and Christianity alike—is not a perversion of “true” religion, but must be accounted for as *religious*. She finds the origin of religious violence in the process of the formation of a collective identity. Such identity formation is central to monotheistic religions, where an identity forged against *the Other* defines THE act of violence. She writes:³

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Violence stems from any conception of identity forged negatively, against the Other, an invention of identity that parasitically depends upon the invention of some Other to be reviled.

According to Schwartz, religion lends an aura of concreteness, timelessness, and supernatural authority to what is really contingent and fabricated. Due to the Bible's enormous cultural weight, identities born in violence can be traced to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Those identities become transcendently authorized within a monotheistic belief system.

Schwartz indicates the strong relationship between violence, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the formation of identity. I agree with her that this relationship exists, but not that the formation of an identity against *the Other* is the fundamental *origin* of religious violence. Such an identity, however, often *leads to violence*. Here I search for a possible fundamental understanding of where the relationship between violence—as seen in the physical abuse of children—and the Judeo-Christian religion comes from.

My argument can be summarized as follows:

1. The scenario where a person, often a child, is being beaten by a parent, an authority figure, or even God is common to the Judeo-Christian tradition.
2. Freud identified masochism and the Oedipal complex as central to the fantasy that a child is being beaten.
3. Martin Bergmann argues that the sadism of the Laius or Jocasta complex predates the Oedipal complex and is part of Judeo-Christian archaic history.
4. In the religious sanctioning of the physical abuse of children, sadism and masochism find the perfect marriage.

Writing this paper, I am well aware that not all Christians and Jews support the physical abuse of children. Some of the critical voices opposing violence against children are indicated here. However, I contend that physical abuse of children is more prevalent than one would like to believe, and that the Judeo-Christian tradition, following an archaic heritage, bears much of the responsibility for this situation.

To spare the child

For centuries, Christians have been among the most ardent advocates of corporal punishment. The Bible has provided fundamental texts that have served successive generations as primary guides to child rearing and child discipline. Where sacrificing a child can be seen as the extreme expression of violence against children, references to punishment in the form of beatings and other forms of chastisement are common in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. In Genesis 22, we find the story of God tempting a father,

Abraham, to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In the New Testament, we find the sacrifice of a son, Jesus.⁴

Fear of God's punishment provided the paradigm for parental discipline of children, a model made explicit in especially the Book of Proverbs attributed to Solomon, the King of Israel:⁵

- "Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of he who lacks judgment" (Proverbs 10:13).
- "He who *s pares the rod* hates his child, but he who loves the child is careful to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24, emphasis added).
- "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from the child" (Proverbs 22:15).
- "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish the child with the rod, the child will not die. Punish the child with the rod and save the child's soul from death" (Proverbs 23:13–14).
- "The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but children left to themselves disgrace their mother" (Proverbs 29:15).

These texts, among others, suggest that a disciplined life and wisdom can be encouraged in children of wise parents who do not "spare the rod" of discipline. The physical abuse of children is placed in the context of the salvation and preservation of the human soul. Many more Old Testament texts communicate the justification of the physical abuse of children. A key text within the New Testament that is often cited in favor of the harsh physical discipline of children, is Hebrews 12:5–11:

⁵And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as children: "My child, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a child." [1] ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as children. For what child is not disciplined by his or her father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true children. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹²Therefore strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

This anonymous author—tradition has designated Paul—reflects on his own experience as a child, using his personal memories of pain and suffering under punishment as a guide to those he is addressing. These verses in Hebrews are not the only ones in the New Testament that are often cited to validate corporal punishment. Interestingly enough, other verses that inform

children to obey their parents, such as Colossians 3:20 and Ephesians 6:1, are all ascribed to Paul, which may suggest an identification with the abuse he received.⁶ A literal reading of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures seem to suggest that a child must be beaten in an attempt to break the will of the child, else immorality and sin would destroy the child's life, bringing shame on the parents of the child.⁷ The question to be asked is *why these images of the physical punishment of children are so prevalent in the Christian Scriptures.*

A child is being beaten

Donald Capps, in his book, *The Child's Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (1995), notes the interesting fact that James Dobson, a supporter of corporal punishment who was often beaten as a child, illustrated a repetitive compulsion.⁸ Dobson, who received his abuse at the hands of his mother, knew very well that certain behavior would illicit beatings. Yet, he could not stop that behavior. Capps believes that the compulsion between mother and son was fueled by a sexual component. The physical abuse of children awakens powerful ambivalent feelings in child and adult alike; ambivalent feelings that often lead to repetitive behavior. There is much more to the beating of a child than following scriptural or even godly advice.

In his essay, "*A Child is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions*" (1919), Sigmund Freud identifies some of the ambivalent feelings in especially his female patients' fantasies about "*a child being beaten.*" The 63-year-old Freud found himself in the midst of the First World War, with a sense of doom that pervaded the German-Austrian society. His one son was a prisoner of war and Freud had not been in contact with him for more than a year. While anti-Semitism was rampant in Vienna, Freud was fighting personal afflictions and addictions. With the reality of war very much impinging on Freud and his household, he was interested in the impact unconscious fantasy might have on behavior. In his search to understand the unconscious, Freud touched on the theme of childhood abuse, a truly visionary mission. He wrote the essay in 1919, focusing on the insights gained from four female and two male clients.⁹ This group of client included Freud's daughter, Anna.

To place Freud's essay in the correct context, it is helpful being reminded that he previously made a distinction between *psychical realities* and *material realities*.¹⁰ In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud writes regarding the crime and guilt experienced by neurotics:¹¹

If, however, we inquire among these neurotics to discover what were the deeds that provoked these reactions, we shall be disappointed. We find no deeds, only impulses and emotions, set upon evil ends but held back from their achievement.

What lie behind the sense of guilt of neurotics are always *psychical* realities and never *factual* ones. What characterizes neurotics is the fact that they prefer psychical reality and react just as seriously as normal persons would do to realities.

It is important to remember that the essay under discussion, "*A Child is Being Beaten*," starts in the *psychical realm*. It seems, however, as if fantasy often becomes reality. In his essay, Freud writes that the beating fantasy carries a high degree of pleasure that is related to masturbatory activity. At first only contained in the psychical reality, a child soon sees another child being physically disciplined, which is a source of similar enjoyment. However, unlike the fantasy, seeing a boy or girl being beaten awakens ambivalent feelings of pleasure and disgust in a child.¹² The ambivalence related to witnessing a beating may have masochistic or sadistic components. The fantasies underlying the ambivalence, according to Freud, were formed before the 5th or 6th year of life.

Freud identifies three phases of the beating-fantasy. The *first phase* belongs to early childhood and is represented by two phrases: "*My father is beating a child (whom I hate)*" and "*He loves only me.*"¹³ The child who is having the fantasy is never the child being beaten. The fantasy gratifies the child's jealousy, reinforces the child's egoistic interests, and is dependent upon erotic impulses. This said, Freud states that the stage cannot be seen as purely sexual or purely sadistic. However, as the child reaches the Oedipal stage and as the incestuous wishes are repressed, guilt appears.¹⁴ This sense of guilt is the precursor for the second stage, turning sadism into masochism.

In the *second phase* changes occur in the fantasy, and the child being beaten is the child producing the fantasy: "*I am being beaten by my father.*" This fantasy is accompanied by a high degree of pleasure and has a masochistic character. Being beaten involves a convergence of the sense of guilt and sexual love. The incestuous Oedipal impulses, through reaction formation, are turned into a need to receive pain, into masochism. Freud saw that the second stage is the only one that remains predominantly unconscious, whereas the first and third stages do enter consciousness. Since the masochistic fantasy remains unconscious, I contend that it retains its emotional power in individuals as well as in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The *third phase* states that it is never the father who beats the child, but someone else, such as a teacher, while "*I am probably looking on.*" The person producing the fantasy no longer appears in the fantasy and a number of children (often boys) are being beaten or are enduring other forms of humiliation and shame.

Looking at the origins of the sexual perversions sadism and masochism, Freud traces them back to the fantasy of being beaten, and in turn to an unresolved Oedipal crisis. The sadism of the first stage is turned into masochism through Oedipal guilt. Freud sees masochism, which comes to the fore during the second stage, as "*incomparably the more important,*" compared to

sadism.¹⁵ With his essay, Freud argued that infantile as well as adult perversions are ramifications of the same complex. Of interest for this paper, however, is that the beating-fantasy in the Judeo-Christian tradition portrays all three stages, but especially the second masochistic stage: *I am being beaten by my father/mother who loves me*. Children are told by Scripture and their parents that they are physically punished because their parents love them.

Freud traces the beating-fantasies to humankind's "archaic heritage," without elaborating upon the theme.¹⁶ The Oedipal complex becomes the link between the beating fantasies and patricide, which Freud discussed in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Humanity's "archaic heritage" suggests that our psyches have a masochistic kernel, a desire to be beaten and physically disciplined by a "loving" parent.

Masochism, sadism, and religion

Martin Bergmann, a practicing psychoanalyst in New York City, postulates a relationship between the "archaic heritage" of humanity and child abuse. In his book, *In the Shadow of Moloch: The Sacrifice of Children and Its Impact on Western Religions* (1992), Bergmann argues that the development of the Judeo-Christian religion can be seen as an effort, only partially successful, to ameliorate past aggression of child sacrifice through the creation of an entirely loving God.¹⁷ He sees the struggle against the custom of child sacrifice as having been a driving force in the development of Western religions. The title of his book refers to God's prohibition placed on Israel not to sacrifice sons and daughters to the god, Moloch, the God of the "Children of Ammon" (Leviticus 18:21; 2 Kings 23:10). Moloch's worship made sons and daughters pass through fire.

For Bergmann, the sacrifice of children was a much more powerful force in the formation of religion than Freud's hypothetical murder of the father by the "primal horde" and the subsequent remorse that followed the murder.¹⁸ Bergmann argues that the religious past of Western culture—which included the sacrificing of children—is "alive in the unconscious and is just as important to atheists as to believers."¹⁹ Bergmann accepts anthropological evidence that suggests that a people is not, as a rule, tempted to take over the religion of its neighbors unless that religion was once its own. *In the Shadow of Moloch*, he suggests that child sacrifice was part of Yahwistic religion's historical past. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the murderous wishes projected onto Yahweh, which resulted in the belief that Yahweh demands the sacrifice of the first born, are transformed into the rite of circumcision and the redemption of the firstborn male child. Bergmann further traces how child sacrifice evolved into the scapegoat mechanism, and in Christianity, into the crucifixion of Jesus and the Eucharist. Christianity's *agape* love was an attempt to establish an all-loving God, but Bergmann argues that *agape* love came at the

cost of sexual love.²⁰ However, before the love of God came to the fore, there was the terror of being sacrificed by the father.

Bergmann argues for five “levels” of thinking within the “psychology of sacrifice.”²¹ The first level is driven by remorse (over an act of aggression such as the successful killing of a wild beast) and by displacement (the idea that someone or something can be substituted for the sacrificer to prolong the latter’s life). The second level identifies sacrifice as a shared meal. The third level identifies sacrifice as a means to receive absolution from sin and guilt, whereas the fourth level identifies moral conduct as having a saving character. In the last level, moral conduct, as a substitute for sacrifice, is replaced by prayer, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom. The Christian religion contains all five levels of thinking and the physical abuse of children can be motivated by each level of thinking. For example, a parent who feels guilty about his or her parenting skills, may assume the “martyr position” when he or she spansks the child to assure good moral conduct.

Bergmann’s psychoanalytic inquiry regarding the psychology of sacrifice leads to a discussion of the “Laius complex” and its corollary, the “Jocasta complex.”²² He discusses the concepts after three chapters in which he addresses Freud’s thinking and the Oedipus complex. These complexes were introduced by George Devereaux in 1953. They denote the sadism and murderous wishes that a father or mother feels toward his or her child.²³ The two complexes were meant to complement Freud’s Oedipal complex by pointing out that the hostility of the father toward the son may antedate and at least in part be responsible for the formation of the Oedipal complex.

The Oedipus myth stated that Laius lived with the curse of not having a child, or being killed by his child. He therefore had murderous wishes towards Oedipus at his birth, leaving him on a mountainside to succumb to the elements. Similar to Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipus complex, Bergmann has a complementary (versus an exclusive) view regarding sadism and masochism. Devereaux introduced into psychoanalysis a debate of central importance: Which came first, the hostility of a child towards a father (the Oedipus complex) or the hostility of a father to a child (the Laius complex)? In addition, is the Laius complex itself a reaction to one’s own Oedipus complex?²⁴ Bergmann provides an answer to these questions when he contends that

the cruelty of the father or both parents toward the child is the crucial psychological event which characterizes the human species. The child’s aggression is only a response to the direct and unconscious aggression of the parents.²⁵

Thus, for Bergmann, cruelty towards children, which once was enacted in the sacrificing of children, is part of human nature. This behavior is addressed by the Judeo-Christian attempt to curb the ultimate violent act against children. However, although religion may have been successful in averting child sacrifice, I contend that religion, when it sanctions the physical

abuse of children, feeds into and gives humanity an outlet to concretize and sublimate masochism and sadism.

Conclusion

In bringing the Oedipal complex and the Laius complex together—both perhaps part of humanity's archaic heritage—I contend we find one possible answer to the question as to why religion sanctions the physical abuse of children. Here we may find the origins of religious violence and the need to identify an *Other*. The Oedipal complex describes the guilt experienced by the child for falling in love with the parent of the opposite sex, guilt that leads to masochism. In return, the Laius complex expresses the murderous wishes from the father or mother toward the child, expressed as sadism. Therefore, and not by strange coincidence, you find that parents want to spank their children while children elicit such behavior from their parents. Sadism seeks out masochism and vice versa. Religion that sanctions the physical abuse of children is therefore not only an outlet for murderous feelings or guilty feelings but constructs a situation where a person cannot escape those feelings. It is for this very reason that Bergmann states that Christianity and Judaism have been only partially successful in ameliorating the past aggression of child sacrifice. He writes that "the God of Judaism and Christianity is never as internalized a structure as the superego becomes in a mature adult, nor could these religions create a truly loving and understanding God."²⁶ According to Bergmann, humanity and the Judeo-Christian religions remain victims of their archaic past, even if they have been successful in overcoming infanticide and patricide.

Schwartz postulated that the violence that stems from monotheism is related to the exclusive identity professed by monotheistic religions, where an identity is established against the *Other*. Another hypothesis may be that the Biblical advice to promote violence, as can be seen in the beating of children, stems from being caught between unresolved Oedipal and Laius complexes and the emotions and attitudes of masochism and sadism they entail. Christianity and Judaism may have thwarted the sacrifice of children as Bergmann suggests, but could not escape their archaic heritage. One question remains, however: Is the physical abuse of children a *mere perversion* of religion, or can it be seen as *religious*?

References

1. This paper was read at a *Blanton-Peale Institute* Clinic Training Conference on May 5, 1999. I thank Dr. Dori Sorter in whose class many of the thoughts contained here were formed.
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3. *Ibid.*, p. 5, 88.
4. See, Greven, P. J. (1992). *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse*. New York: Vintage Books.
5. Bible quotations were taken from the New International Version: The Holy Bible: New International Version (1984). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.
6. "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord" (Colossians 3:20); "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Ephesians 6; 1).
7. It lies outside the scope of this essay to discuss literature that expands on the rationale of beating children. Some examples of proponents of corporal punishment are: Roy Lessin (1979), *Spanking: Why When How?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers); Larry Christenson (1991), *The Christian Family* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers); Jack Hyles (1972), *How to Rear Children* (Hammond: Hyles-Anderson Publishers); James Dobson (1996), *The New Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton: Tyndale House).
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14. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
17. Bergmann, M. S. (1992). *In the Shadow of Moloch: The Sacrifice of Children and its Impact on Western Religions*. New York: Columbia University Press.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
23. See also, Parker, Rozsika. (1995). *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*. New York: Basic Books. Parker discusses the sadistic feelings mothers have towards their children.
24. Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, p. 294. Bergmann mentions that Freud did have a dream in which he was hostile towards a son who was a soldier during World War I. Freud interpreted his hateful and sadistic feelings as envy by an older man for the young.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

