



***Traditional Families
Parents and children in the Qur'an as interpreted by
Kathir, Qutb, and Qaradawi***

Sarah Fritsche
Grinnell College

This article attempts to illuminate what the Qur'an says about the religious responsibilities of parent/child relationships, while simultaneously considering how different interpretations of these messages function in a changing world. I use Qur'anic commentaries from traditional interpreters and from those who would break from old patterns of interpretation, and glean from them a better understanding of the text itself and an insight into the nature of tradition itself. I argue that these different approaches to understanding familial roles in the Qur'an illustrate flexibility that is intrinsic to tradition, so often mischaracterized as rigid. I analyze the language of these different interpreters, pulling apart the ways in which they lean on either ancient traditions of consensus or on more modern discourses. I conclude that breaking from traditional approaches to understanding Qur'anic parent/child relationships does not necessarily create a more liberal or flexible interpretation of family roles, and incorporating more modern methods can in fact make an interpretation of the Qur'an more rigid and unyielding.

The concept of family is a topic with no shortage of opinionated observers willing to discuss it. The family has become a battleground in the so-called culture wars, and everybody wants a hand in deciding its definition, its value, and its place in society. Add in another subject of burgeoning popularity, the religion of Islam, and you have a combination that has produced volumes of academic discussion and analysis. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Keisha Ali, Saba Mahmood, John Esposito, and Natana J. Delong-Bas have all contributed their thoughts on what Islam has to say about family and family law. These discussions, however, tend to focus disproportionately on husbands and wives. The gender politics of spousal relationships alone provide so much to discuss that the rest of the family—parents, grandparents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, etc.—tends to go unexamined in modern scholarly analysis. Yet, these other relationships can be just as influential in the lives of believers and believing communities. I aim to fill in the gap where discussion of the specific relationship between parents and children belongs.

Seeing how fiercely contested family matters are today, it is hardly surprising that so many marriage-focused analyses exist, but a family undoubtedly needs instruction beyond that. So, when believers look to their religions for advice on how to be the best parent or the best child they can be, what will they find?

In a religion such as Islam, with its rich history of Qur'anic commentary and analysis, reading the holy text itself is only the barest beginning of a process of understanding that can fill lifetimes. In an attempt to better understand the possible meanings behind Qur'anic statements of parent/child roles, I explored the writings of three different interpreters: an *'alim* (Muslim scholar and traditional interpreter of Qur'anic law, plural: *ulama*) from the 14th century, a formally trained scholar still active today, and a 20th century radical with no real training in traditional Qur'anic commentary. With their help, not only can I begin to better understand how the Qur'an shapes parent/child relationships, but their commentary also begins to illuminate a broader reality. By choosing these three interpreters—Ibn Kathir, who represents a traditional framework that generations after him would follow; al-Qaradawi, who represents a modern commentator who would continue that tradition; and Qutb, one who would break from old ways and interpret the Qur'an with fresh eyes—I was able to make intriguing comparisons between a traditional and a reformative approach to the text. In thinking critically about how tradition functions in the interpretation of Qur'anic family roles, I slowly came to realize that sticking to traditional methods may actually provide an unexpected flexibility to interpretations, and breaking from tradition may not necessarily be the more liberatory option.

My investigation into what it means to be a good parent or a good child according to the Qur'an quickly became more than that. Children and parents in the Qur'an and in others' understanding of the Qur'an became an instance that demonstrates the ways in which tradition, as rigid as it may seem, can provide a broader range of options than a reading that breaks from tradition to incorporate a more modern method. Qutb, despite his interest in breaking away from stifling layers of accumulated opinions, actually ends up creating a picture of family life that is far more reified and unalterable than either his more traditional contemporary al-Qaradawi or the literally medieval Ibn Kathir.

In looking at the Qur'an¹ for what guidance it has to offer on how to have a good and proper parent/child relationship, I found a number of instructions dealing with everything from breastfeeding to inheritance. Despite the wide variety of Qur'anic passages on parents and children—regulating adoption, prohibiting sexual relationships, forbidding infanticide, etc.—what truly interests me has less to do with what is allowed or disallowed, and more to do with what is expected. I looked to the Qur'an in hopes of finding and understanding what responsibilities a good Muslim child has to his or her parents, and what responsibilities a good Muslim parent has to his or her child. What I found painted a clear picture of mutual accountability, with both parents and children expected to fulfill their duties to each other. I will outline these core principles of the parent/child relationship, along with, for brevity's sake, short

illustrative verses of the Qur'an.

1. *Children must be good to their parents.* Being good to one's parents entails, above all, obedience and deference to them. It also means showing them gratefulness for raising you, caring for them in old age, and spending your charity first on them. This command is often very closely connected in the text to obedience and loyalty to Allah.

Do not set up any other deity side by side with God, lest thou find thyself disgraced and forsaken: for thy Sustainer has ordained that you shall worship none but Him. And do good unto [thy] parents. Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in thy care, never say 'Ugh' to them or scold them, but [always] speak unto them with reverent speech, and spread over them humbly the wings of thy tenderness, and say: 'O my Sustainer! Bestow Thy grace upon them, even as they cherished and reared me when I was a child!'²

Even to speak rudely to your parents or admonish them would be to fail as a good and dutiful child, according to the Qur'an.

2. *Mothers must produce children, and fathers must provide for them.* Although the Qur'an may not allocate every specific parenting responsibility to either the mother or the father, there are certain duties very clearly assigned along gendered lines. Mothers must carry and birth children – which the Qur'an recognizes as a significant struggle and sacrifice. Children are breast-fed until the age of two, although not necessarily by their mothers, and fathers are expected to provide everything necessary for pregnancy and childcare other than performing the biological processes themselves. Responsibility for a child is undeniably laid at the feet of the father.

In pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth; and her bearing him and his utter dependence on her took thirty months.³

And if [any ex-wives] happen to be with child, spend freely on them until they deliver their burden; and if they nurse your offspring [after the divorce has become final], give them their [due] recompense; and take counsel with one another in a fair manner [about the child's future]. And if both of you find it difficult [that the mother should nurse the child], let another woman nurse it on behalf of him [who has begotten it].⁴

And the [divorced] mothers may nurse their children for two whole years, if they wish to complete the period of nursing; and it is incumbent upon him who has begotten the child to provide in a fair manner for their sustenance and clothing.⁵

In the text of the Qur'an, Allah lays the responsibility of childbirth on women, but nearly all other child-rearing responsibilities are left to the father to arrange and provide for. If the mother ends up being the one to breastfeed and care for the child, it is not because she is expected or required by Allah to do so. Ultimate responsibility for a child's wellbeing rests with its father, who must provide anyone who assists in its rearing with recompense and support for their work.

Although my goal is to understand what the Qur'an has to say on this topic, my task is not done with a simple reading of the text. No matter how well I interpret what the Qur'an has to say about the duties of parents and children, my understanding will be limited by my particular placement in time and space. There has long been a stumbling block in the field of Religious Studies, which causes Western scholars to frequently stop short of full understanding, favoring direct interaction with source-texts over deference toward accumulated years of interpretation and practice.⁶ Scholar Talal Asad criticizes this tendency in his 2009 article, "Ideas of Anthropology of Islam," saying, "If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition."⁷ If I want to understand something about parents and children in the Qur'an, I will have to look beyond my own interpretation of the text, to the long tradition of Qur'anic interpretation.

The *ulama* have historically been the ones responsible for studying and interpreting the Qur'an on behalf of the community. Their judgments would be based on their reading of the text, combined with their understanding of *ahadith* and *sunnah* (stories of the Prophet and the first Muslim community), and the accumulated decisions made by previous interpreters. It is their longstanding tradition of interpretation that will begin to add depth to my understanding of the Qur'an.

Ibn Kathir – *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*

When Isma'il ibn Umar Ibn Kathir—a 14th century 'alim—looks at the issues surrounding parents and children, he builds up his understanding based on what has been passed down through the commentaries of those who came before him. Born in Damascus around the year 1313 C.E.,⁸ Ibn Kathir was trained in the classical method of approaching and interpreting Islam's foundational texts. In his time, the *ulama* were responsible for guarding and interpreting divine instruction and administering religious law within the community.⁹ True to the tendencies of his historical location, his commentaries are filled with mentions of previous interpreters, references to *ahadith*, and arguments over details of Qur'anic grammar and word-choice. Within his discussion of even a small section of the aforementioned instructions to parents and children, these methods of approaching the text become clear. When Ibn Kathir looks at those verses that deal specifically with parents' duties to their

children and children’s duties to their parents, what does he see?

The first aspect of Qur’anic instruction identified earlier in this paper—be good to your parents—is addressed by Ibn Kathir in a way that reveals something about his approach to the text as well as his beliefs about what a Muslim parent/child relationship should look like. He keeps his interpretation tied tightly to the text, explaining each fragment of a sentence rather than reaching for overarching messages. When discussing verses 23-25 in the seventeenth *surah* (chapter of the Qur’an), his commentary looks like this:

‘And do not reprimand them’ means, do not do anything horrible to them. Ata bin Rabah said that this meant, ‘Do not raise your hand against them.’ When Allah forbids speaking and behaving in an obnoxious manner, He commands speaking and behaving in a good manner, so He says: ‘but address them in terms of honor,’ meaning gently, kindly, politely, and with respect and appreciation. ‘and lower unto them the wing of submission and humility through mercy,’ means, be humble towards them in your actions.¹⁰

Patiently, he parses each phrase, and—this is worth noting—uses the previous interpretation of Ata bin Rabah to supplement his own understanding of the verse’s meaning. Later, Ibn Kathir cites another source of authority with which he bolsters his belief in the importance of filial respect. “It is recorded in the Two Sahihs that Ibn Masud said, ‘I asked Allah’s Messenger about which deed is the best. He said, ‘The prayer, when it is performed on time.’ I said, ‘Then?’ He said, ‘Being dutiful to parents.’”¹¹ Using ahadith in this kind of interpretive effort is a technique central to Islamic tradition of commentary. Beyond helping us understand traditional methods, Ibn Kathir’s writing also reveals a certain attitude toward familial relationships. In his analysis of one *surah*, he characterizes “being good to parents” as a distinctively religious duty: “Allah mentions the dutiful offspring who supplicate for their parents and treat them with kindness. He describes the success and salvation He has prepared for them.”¹² Ibn Kathir sees the issue as being centered on Allah; believers should be kind and obedient to their parents because Allah has commanded it, and He will reward their obedience. Ibn Kathir gives a view into the traditional understanding of the nature of parent/child relationships as—at least in part—a set of religious obligations sent down by Allah, which believing individuals will fulfill out of their belief in and desire to please Allah. Already, this commentary provides subtler insight into Qur’anic instruction than looking solely to the text could. It is one thing to understand that the Qur’an commands children to be good to their parents; it is another to read how believers have seen and contextualized this command.

A similar attitude appears in Ibn Kathir’s approach to mothers’ and fathers’ responsibilities. The more he analyzes the Qur’anic verses related to parental duties, the more it becomes clear that he sees such relationships as contractual obligations between individuals and Allah, where fathers are entire-

ly responsible for the wellbeing of their progeny, and mothers' participation is owed only insofar as the physical welfare of the child demands. In no uncertain terms, he explains that parenting roles and responsibilities have been "legislated" by Allah, saying that those Qur'anic verses outlining these roles are "a mercy from Allah to His servants, for He has legislated the best method for parents to rear their children, and His legislation guides and directs the parents and the children to success."¹³ This framing of parents being connected to their children through divine law is further elaborated as Ibn Kathir delineates the specific duties of mothers and fathers. In the case of a divorce, "the mother is allowed to give up the child and the father is allowed to assume custody of the child. The father should kindly give the mother her expenses for the previous period (during which she reared and suckled the child), and he should seek other women to suckle his child for monetary compensation."¹⁴ There is no real question of who is ultimately responsible for the child when a divorce necessitates the explicit separating of parental roles. The father must take charge, and the mother is treated as a paid helper who has provided her services to the father in rearing and suckling the child, and who deserves recompense for her labor. The only undeniable requirement Allah makes of mothers—according to Ibn Kathir—is to nurse for the few days after birth when she is producing colostrum, a mild yellowy breast milk vital to infants' immune systems. After this duty is fulfilled, Ibn Kathir writes, "if she suckles, she has the right to compensation for it. She is allowed to enter into a contract with the father or his representative in return for whatever payment they agree to."¹⁵

In this classical interpretation of the gendered duties of parents as laid out in the Qur'an, men end up with far more responsibility for—and power over—the children they produce. It is telling that Ibn Kathir defines orphans as "children who have none to look after them, having lost their father while they are still young."¹⁶ By Ibn Kathir's estimation, Allah has legislated far more extensive duties for fathers than He has for mothers, and these roles are to be followed out of faith and obedience to Allah's wishes.

Ibn Kathir's commentary provides such an excellent view into the classical framework of Qur'anic interpretation because his style and approach exemplify much that was typical of that era, from an interest in how divine laws and divine legislation impact practical outcomes, to a focus on parsing grammatical meaning, to a penchant for frequent references to the opinions and stories of his forbearers. Ibn Kathir represents an interpretive tradition that valued a close, passionless examination of texts, without efforts to paint a broader picture or elucidate some sort of Qur'anic thesis. For example, Ibn Kathir spends a great deal of time on verse seventy-two of the sixteenth surah, simply deciding what exactly is meant by a phrase that could either mean "children," "grandchildren," "sons-in-law," or "servants or helpers." He cites nine different scholars' opinions on the topic before finally concluding that the categories of children, grandchildren, and sons-in-law are all legitimate interpretations of the phrase.¹⁷ To a modern reader, this may seem an excessively pedantic approach, but it is simply the way the ulamic tradition has accumulated Qur'anic understanding. In explanation of this method, one scholar

writes, “If we read [a foundational text] as a story, we abandon its historical truth. If we read it as literature, we will often find literary art in it, but this art takes us further from truth.”¹⁸ One interesting aspect of this method, a method that apparently requires citing nine other opinions before drawing even the smallest linguistic conclusion about the meaning of a verse, is that it can afford a certain amount of flexibility to its employers. In fact, Ibn Kathir’s own teacher, Ibn Taymiyyah, was well known for taking advantage of this possibility. Ibn Taymiyyah “seized upon any difference of opinion then existing to question whether a true *ijma* [jurisprudential consensus] had been reached on the matter, and advocated continuing *ijtihad* [individual judgment] by choosing amongst these differences.”¹⁹ In this way, the tradition of referencing earlier conclusions need not prove to be an unwieldy burden to one who wishes to interpret Allah’s message for himself.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi – *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*

Today, there are those who continue this traditional framework of interpretation, deriving their authority from a connection with those who came before. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, born 1946 C.E. in Egypt and still alive today, is one such commentator. Qaradawi was trained in the classical framework at the Faculty of Theology—*usul al-din*—at al-Azhar University in Cairo,²⁰ and over his lifetime, has risen to a position of official authority, interpreting God’s message for a global community of Islam as an ‘alim.²¹ In his book, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*, he employs a very modern presentation—organizing his commentary by topic rather than by verse—while maintaining the traditionalist approach of basing his advice largely on ahadith and older readings of the Qur’an.²² Although Qaradawi’s writing does not technically fall into the category of *tafsir* (formal commentary or interpretation of the Qur’an), when it comes to the topic of parental and filial duties, its function is the same: to discern God’s will, primarily from the text of the Qur’an but also from ahadith and sunnah, and to provide guidance for believers. Its format may be strange, but what Qaradawi hopes to provide with *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam* is very much what all commentaries hope to provide: guidance for the community.

When it comes to his opinions on children’s duties to be good to parents and parents’ gender-specific duties to their children, little about the core message has a definite continuity with interpretations from the fourteenth century, although there are a few differences in interpretation worth noticing. For one, Qaradawi is not nearly as clear about parental responsibilities as was Ibn Kathir, spending less time on them, and barely mentioning mothers at all. The furthest he goes in outlining gendered roles for parents is to say that a mother deserves gratitude “because of her suffering during pregnancy and childbirth, her suckling of the child, and her role in rearing it,”²³ that fathers who fail to provide for their dependents are destined for Hell,²⁴ and that a child is “an extension of his father and the bearer of his characteristics. During his lifetime he is the joy of his father’s eye, while after his death he represents a continua-

tion of his existence and an embodiment of his immortality.... The child is a part of his father's heart and a piece of his body."²⁵ As little instruction as this provides, it seems essentially to match up with Ibn Kathir's interpretation that women are meant to produce children, and men are meant to provide for them.

There is still a tendency to frame the parent/child relationship in terms of legal rights and religious obligations, but Qaradawi also shows an interest in abstract concepts and broad theses—an interest likely connected to his unusual non-verse-based presentation. For example, he writes, "It is the right of parents that their children should treat them with kindness, obedience, and honor,"²⁶ and, "taking care of parents is a greater obligation than jihad in the cause of Allah,"²⁷ thus framing the relationship in somewhat contractual terms, much as Ibn Kathir did. Another connection to the classical framework is Qaradawi's use of ahadith to supplement and explain his opinions, such as when he writes, "the Prophet (peace be on him) not only prohibited insulting or cursing one's parents but declared it to be a major sin. He said, 'Among the major sins is a man's cursing his parents.'"²⁸ Yet later, while still addressing the same topic, Qaradawi does not hesitate to engage in a type of discourse that owes little to the traditional framework from which he derives his authority. He explains at one point that "Islam imposed certain mutual rights... upon children and parents, making certain things *haram* [forbidden] for them in order to protect these rights."²⁹ It is not necessarily the message here that needs examining, but rather the idea that "Islam imposed" anything at all. It is a turn of phrase that may seem unexceptional to the modern reader, but the idea that "Islam"—the concept of submission to God—is some kind of actualized entity operating in the world is one that never appears in classical texts. These references to what "Islam is" or what "Islam does" are a result of a global discourse that defines religion as a distinct, definable thing, separate from the secular or nonreligious parts of life.³⁰ The fact that this discourse shows up in Qaradawi's writing shows how his project—one of discerning God's guidance—has adjusted itself to his specific time and place, while still maintaining a connection to more ancient models.

Much like his classical predecessors, Qaradawi is known for taking advantage of the flexibility that traditional methods afford. Says one scholar of his approach, "He employs all the skills and arguments of the traditional *faqih* (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), even when in the end he often opts for the 'easiest' or 'most lenient' of a range of positions on a given question."³¹ Like those who were discerning God's will 600 years earlier, Qaradawi can respect the conclusions and opinions of those who came before him while simultaneously finding the space to interpret God's message in the way that best fits the realities of the Muslim community as he sees it.

Sayyid Qutb – *In the Shade of the Qur'an*

Our third and final commentator, nearly Qaradawi's contemporary, would have had little patience with his efforts to find flexibility within the long-accumulated traditions of jurisprudence. Born 40 years before Qaradawi,

in 1906, in a small Egyptian town,³² Sayyid Qutb did not take a traditional path to his eventual writing of an extensive Qur’anic commentary. While boys destined for the *ulama* went to al-Azhar University—Qaradawi’s future *alma mater*—Qutb went to a Cairo Teachers’ College and earned a BA in education, followed by an MA in education from the University of Northern Colorado, in the USA.³³ In school, he excelled in studying literature and poetry,³⁴ and began a career as a writer, producing many works in the years from the 1930s to the late 1940s, from poetry to literary criticism to political fiction.³⁵ An active member of the Islamic Brotherhood, Qutb was deeply interested in religion, but never felt entirely comfortable with the form he saw it taking. He did not like how common it was for believers to “[confuse] the idea of religion itself with what is called the ‘men of religion’.... These people are the farthest of Allah’s creations to represent Islam and its ideas. There are some people who think that the rule of Islam is meant to be the rule of skaykhs and dervishes! There is nothing of these in the pure and correct Islam.”³⁶ Qutb could not accept the authority of shaykhs or *ulama* or sufi mystics, dismissing them as “the men of religion” and insisting that they had no connection with what he considered to be true Islam. It is here that we begin to see Qutb’s break with the traditions of which Kathir and Qaradawi are a part.

When Qutb approaches the Qur’an, he aims to do so without the countless earlier interpretations that guide and—in his eyes—limit more traditional commentators. When he began to read books of exegesis, Qutb could not “find the same thrill as that of his childhood [when first he encountered the Qur’an] in what he read or heard.” He continued to be disappointed until he set out to study the Qur’an on his own, leaving behind the opinions of the commentators and transmitters that came before.³⁷ In 1954, during a period of upheaval in Egypt, Qutb was imprisoned for his connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, a hardship that would prove to be a crucial chapter in his religious life. In the solitude of prison, he began to record his own understanding of the Qur’an—or, more accurately to his being shaped by modern discourses surrounding religion, his own understanding of Islam. Prison was the perfect environment for what Qutb wished to do, far removed from the more workaday concerns of Muslims living their lives out in the community.³⁸ He was able to reflect on the text alone, and draw out what he saw as its true messages—and thus the true messages of Islam—long obscured by traditional interpretative authorities. There is no doubt that Qutb saw himself as a reformer, someone who could see how far Islam had strayed from its original intentions and who saw a solution in breaking with those who had allowed it to become an emotionless endeavor of “pure intellectualism” unconnected to the spirit of the original divine message.³⁹ His ambitions have been compared to those of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, his complaints against the shaykhs and *ulama* not unlike their complaints against Catholic practices and institutions.⁴⁰

Yet for all this revolutionary spirit, when it comes to parents and children, there is little that differentiates Qutb’s beliefs from those of any other reader of the Qur’an. Were a believer to read his *In the Shade of the Qur’an* looking for some kind of advice or a better understanding of what it means to

be a good Muslim mother, father, or child, the answers would look quite similar to those in Ibn Kathir's or Qaradawi's writings. For children, be good to your parents and grateful for what you owe them;⁴¹ for mothers, carry and nurse your children while they need you; and for fathers, children are your responsibility and you must ensure they are cared for.⁴² However, the worldview that underlies Qutb's conclusions seems to differ significantly, and that comes out in his writing, marking a noteworthy discontinuity with the more traditional style of interpretation. Rarely, if ever, does he write about the parent/child relationship in terms of sacred duties or obligations. Instead, the language he uses is one of "parental instinct,"⁴³ "human nature,"⁴⁴ and "the natural course of life."⁴⁵ In fact, parental duties—particularly those of mothers—are framed not as duties at all, but as natural urges:

Among the qualities the woman has been given are tenderness, quick reaction, and an instinctive response to the needs of children, without the need for much deliberation and reflection.... *There is no external compulsion in this.* It is an impulsive reaction, which the woman mostly enjoys despite the fact that it requires sacrifice from her (emphasis added).⁴⁶

I emphasize the sentence, "There is no external compulsion in this," for its obvious contrast with the previously discussed viewpoint that frames motherly actions as being most certainly externally compelled, by none other than Allah. Even when discussing the duty of children to be respectful to parents, Qutb seems more interested in discussing what is natural than in discussing what is required by God. "In most cases," he writes, explaining why so many verses instruct children to care for parents, "the younger generation direct their feelings, sympathies, and concerns to the generation which will follow them, not the preceding one, simply because in life people tend to look forward without turning back. Hence, these directives from the All-Merciful, the Compassionate."⁴⁷ This interest in justifying Allah's choices, in explaining *why* the Qur'an has certain content as much as explaining the content itself, distinguishes Qutb from both Ibn Kathir and Qaradawi, despite their similar conclusions on the actual roles Muslim parents and children should play.

As Qutb continues his efforts to explain Allah's message, it becomes more and more obvious how little his approach has in common with classical methods of interpretation. Those long chains of transmission meticulously cited by Ibn Kathir are conspicuously missing, and where Ibn Kathir or Qaradawi used sayings of the Prophet or decisions from earlier commentators to drive home a point, Qutb uses science and biological determinism. The issue of breastfeeding serves as a perfect example of Qutb's disconnect with the tradition of accumulated religious knowledge, and his acceptance of other, more modern discourses. When explaining the ins-and-outs of this particular motherly duty, Ibn Kathir feels "we should state that Ibn Jarir has explained this subject in detail in his Tafsir and that he also stated that suckling a child after the second year might harm the child's body and mind."⁴⁸ Qutb, on the other hand,

goes with, “Modern scientific research has shown that the mother’s milk is essential for the first two years of life for the healthy physical and psychological development of the child.”⁴⁹ The message to mothers may ultimately be the same—nurse your children for two years—but the presentation reveals much about where these two men feel authority lies, and about what exactly they are trying to prove.

Never formally trained in religious commentary, and influenced by the same academic narratives that led Qaradawi to treat the religion of Islam as a single coherent entity, Qutb chooses to employ his skills as a literary critic, locating the broad themes and overarching messages about what Islam is, while breezing past those questions of grammar and linguistic nuance that mattered so much in more traditional readings of the text. “The significance and the spirit of Qur’anic teachings does not lie in understanding its words and sentences,”⁵⁰ Qutb writes, summarily dismissing the importance of linguistic analysis in Qur’anic interpretation. Instead, he focuses on the search for the Qur’an’s “harmonious and integral thesis,”⁵¹ the message that will tie an entire religion together, reaching beyond the smaller-scope messages that can be found in individual verses. This ultimately leads him away from focusing on minor instances of guidance, and toward grand statements about “the way things are.” Though the difference between “all mothers/fathers/children should strive to do these things” and “these are simply the things all mothers/fathers/children do naturally,” may seem subtle, it has much greater implications when it comes to the flexibility of Qutb’s take on his religion. As we have seen in the traditional method of relying on accumulated commentaries and legal decisions, ancient scholarly opinions can be selectively referenced to suit a Muslim community’s changing needs. But does breaking from this tradition and tying authority and judgments instead to “human nature” allow for more flexibility, or less?

Flexibility of Different Approaches

Thanks to its deep roots in Protestant Christian thinking, the very category of religion tends to reflect uniquely Christian preoccupations. The post-Enlightenment and post-Reformation concept of “religion” that permeates academia encourages certain assumptions about the value of following accumulated tradition versus the value of breaking from that tradition to find the fundamental elements in a religion. Religions are frequently reduced to the contents of their texts, and efforts to return to the “original” version of a religion tend to be viewed as positive, logical undertakings.⁵² According to these long-standing assumptions, opinions based on the cumulative rulings of men who died hundreds of years ago should be expected to lead to a more restrictive worldview than those drawn directly from holy texts. A certain category of observer—a category into which many Western academic minds fall—may instinctively feel that Qutb, the reformer who explicitly breaks from stale accumulations of jurisprudence, likely provides a more progressive, liberal ruling on issues of family life and parental responsibilities. Yet the truth is far more complicated. In fact,

Qutb, when contrasted with Qaradawi and Ibn Kathir, provides a jarring reminder that tradition is not always restrictive, and that breaking from tradition is not always liberatory.

As was pointed out above, despite his anti-establishment attitude and eagerness to reinterpret the Qur'anic message for himself, Qutb's actual opinions regarding parents and children do not differ greatly from those of either Qaradawi or Ibn Kathir. Children are still expected to defer to their parents, mothers are expected to produce children, and fathers are expected to provide for them. It seems that, for all his differences in approach, as soon as Qutb breaks from institutional authority, other discourses—literary analysis, “human nature,” biology—flood in to fill the gap left by those traditional methods, ultimately resulting in verdicts that are no more liberatory or progressive than those that rely on the structures of tradition. What was once justified by the words of ancient scholars is now justified by “modern science.” Any expectations an observer might have about the inherent liberalizing nature of such a project are effectively quashed by Qutb's failure to create new verdicts in the case of parents and children.

We cannot pretend, however, that Qutb brought nothing new to his interpretation of the Qur'an. Indeed, we just explored in detail how he looked to science and the “natural” way of things to help explain what he encountered in the text. Yet, perhaps ironically, this new and modern approach to interpretation ended up producing an understanding even less amenable to change or adaptation than those supposedly unchanging traditions followed by more conventional commentators. Tying expectations to “human nature,” insisting that certain behaviors are “the natural course of life,” renders the message unchanging in a way that choosing among manifold Qur'anic interpretations from past commentators does not. If certain things are true simply because that is the way people *are*, then there is no space for future amendments or reinterpretations. On the other hand, both Ibn Kathir and Qaradawi participated in an unmistakable selection process, building their interpretations on a sturdy foundation of earlier writers' decisions, but choosing which individual bricks to use. In a recent attempt at defining “tradition,” religious scholar Talal Asad supports this idea that repetition does not necessarily have to be restrictive or unchanging:

Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.... An Islamic tradition [is not] necessarily imitative of what was done in the past.⁵³

This definition captures an important truth: tradition is not necessarily imitative of what was done in the past. Being connected to a chain of practice stretching through previous generations does not mean that a classically

trained commentator like Ibn Kathir or Qaradawi is merely repeating what has already been said. There is room to interpret and adapt and add, according to what they feel the needs of their community are. Qutb's worldview lacks such flexibility. He has adapted his approach to the needs of the community at his particular moment, but by attaching his advice to the unchangeable "facts" of human nature, he fails to prepare for the eventuality that future believers may have different needs. Qutb explicitly frees himself from the baggage of tradition, yet still reproduces similar messages on the topic of parent/child relationships. In fact, we see that breaking from ancient rules and interpretations can actually produce a system of understanding that is less flexible than the layers of tradition customarily attached to Islamic practice.

Having begun with such a simple question—what does the Qur'an say about parents' and children's responsibilities toward each other—this endeavor has spread out in unexpected directions. Any believer looking for guidance in his or her parent/child relationships would surely find it in any one of the commentaries I have sourced, or, indeed, by looking solely at the Qur'an itself. In all cases, believers would find some variation on the themes I first identified: be good to your parents, and divide parenting duties by gender with most of the responsibility resting with the father. To a certain extent, these instructions are the answer to my original question, and my inquiry need not go further than that. But from the perspective of someone involved in the broader study of religion, there is still much to be examined. The differences in the three interpreters' approaches—Ibn Kathir and Qaradawi's traditional methods versus Qutb's reformative attitude—are not insignificant. Their divergence might not make a difference to someone seeking guidance on how to be a better Muslim parent or child, but to a scholar of religion, their differences teach us something valuable about the nature of tradition, reformation, and our own assumptions on these topics as western academic observers. Aspects of religion do not necessarily conform to our expectations of them. A practice like citing long chains of ancient opinions before making even the slightest decision on a current matter may strike one as an overly rigid reliance on tradition, especially when compared to a method that favors leaving those chains behind and reinterpreting religious messages in a modern context. But with an eye to our own potential biases, these texts can reveal things we might not otherwise realize. In this case, we deliberately looked beyond a simple direct reading and sought to honestly understand a holy text in all of its interpreted complexity, and found that rigid tradition can be an ever-changing and easily adjusted process, while casting off the heavy burden of tradition can mean simply donning a new layer of inflexible modern rhetoric.

Works Cited

- al-Qaradawi, Yusuf. *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam (Al-Halal Wal Haram Fil Islam)*. Burr Ridge, IL: American Trust Publications, 1999.
- al-Wahid, Mustafa Abd, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad* Volume II, Translated by Trevor Le Gassick, Reviewed by Muneer Fareed. Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1998.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Asad, Talal. "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." *Qui Parle*. 17. no. 2 (2009): 1-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685738>.
- Black, Antony. *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.
- Faruki, Kemal A. *The Evolution of Islamic Constitutional Theory and Practice from 610 to 1926*. Karachi, Pakistan: National Publishing House Ltd., 1971.
- Graf, Bettina and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen. "Introduction." In *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, edited by Bettina Graf and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, 1-12. London: Hurst & Company, 2009.
- Ibn Kathir, Isma'il ibn Umar. *Tafsir ibn Kathir: (abridged)/Abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri*. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000.
- Khatab, Sayed. *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah*. New York: Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2006.
- Lapidus, Ira M. *A History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- The Message of the Qur'an: the Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration*, Translated by Muhammad Asad. Bitton, England: Book Foundation, 2003.
- Moussalli, Ahmad S. *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb*. Beirut, Lebanon: American University of Beirut, 1992.
- Premawardhana, Devaka. "Christianity Becomes Unfamiliar: World Christianity is Changing the Study of World Religions." *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 39 (2011). <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/christianity-abecomes-unfamiliar>.
- Qutb, Sayyid. *In the Shade of the Qur'an (Fi zilal al-Qur'an)*. Translated and edited by M.A. Salahi and A.A. Shamis. Leicester, U.K.: Islamic Foundation, 1999.
- Qutb, Sayyid, *The Sayyid Qutb Reader: Selected Writings on Politics, Religion, and Society*, Edited by Albert J. Bergensen. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. "Yusuf Al-Qaradawi on Women." In *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, edited by Bettina Graf and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, 181-208. London: Hurst & Company, 2009.

Notes

1. *The Message of the Qur'an : the Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration*. Trans. Muhammad Asad. Bitton, England: Book Foundation, 2003
2. Qur'an 17:22-25.
3. Qur'an 46:15.
4. Qur'an 65:6.
5. Qur'an 17:30
6. Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle*, 17, no. 2 (2009): 1-30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685738>, 17-18.
7. Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 20.
8. Mustafa Abd Al-Wahid, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad* Volume II, trans. Trevor Le Gassick, rev. Muneer Fareed (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1998), xv.
9. Kemal A. Faruki, *The Evolution of Islamic Constitutional Theory and Practice from 610 to 1926*, (Karachi, Pakistan: National Publishing House Ltd., 1971), 64.
10. Isma'il ibn Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir: (abridged)/Abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri*. (Riyah: Darus-salam, 2000), V5, 603-607.
11. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V3, 506-512.
12. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V9, 62-66.
13. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V1, 650-657.
14. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V1, 650-657.
15. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V10, 47-50.
16. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V1, 481.
17. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V5, 494.
18. Al-Wahid, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, xviii.
19. Faruki, *The Evolution of Islamic Constitutional Law and Practice*, 62.
20. Bettina Graf and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, "Introduction," in *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, ed. Bettina Graf and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen. (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 2-3.
21. Graf and Skovgaard-Petersen, "Introduction," 12.
22. Graf and Skovgaard-Petersen, "Introduction," 184
23. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam (Al-Halal Wal Haram Fil Islam)*, (Burr Ridge, IL: American Trust Publications, 1999), 232.
24. Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*, 230.
25. Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*, 221.
26. Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*, 232.
27. Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*, 234-35.
28. Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*, 234-35.
29. Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Forbidden in Islam*, 230.

30. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
31. Graf and Skovgaard-Petersen, "Introduction," 207.
32. Sayyid Qutb, *The Sayyid Qutb Reader: Selected Writings on Politics, Religion, and Society*, ed. Albert J. Bergensen (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3.
33. Qutb, *The Sayyid Qutb Reader*, 3.
34. Qutb, *The Sayyid Qutb Reader*, 3.
35. Ahmad S. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb*, (Beirut, Lebanon: American University of Beirut, 1992), 21-22.
36. Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah*, (New York: Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 48.
37. Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*, 83.
38. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, 35.
39. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, 41.
40. Qutb, *The Sayyid Qutb Reader*, 9.
41. Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an (Fi zilal al-Qur'an)*. Trans. M.A. Salahi and A.A Shamis. (Leicester, U.K.: Islamic Foundation, 1999), V11, 150-152.
42. Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, V3, 131.
43. Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, V3, 55.
44. Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, V15, 353-354
45. Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, V11, 150-152.
46. Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, V3, 131.
47. Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, V3, 146.
48. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, V1, 650-657.
49. Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, V1, 289.
50. Qutb, *The Sayyid Qutb Reader*, 14.
51. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, 39
52. Devaka Premawardhana, "Christianity Becomes Unfamiliar: World Christianity is Changing the Study of World Religions," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 39 (2011) <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/christianity-becomes-unfamiliar>.
53. Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 20.