

**ARE YOU MY MOTHER: REDEFINING CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF ADOPTION  
THROUGH THE NEO-CONFUCIAN CONCEPT OF *QI***

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was nine years old, as a Chinese adoptee with a transracial family, I insulted a child who wasn't adopted. Walking on opposite sides of the playground's platform walkways, with teal plastic roofs above our heads and bright yellow poles forming a square around us, we were like two animals verbally fighting to dominate our afterschool daycare. My opponent stood on a platform slightly higher than mine. The fight began with trivial and meaningless shouts: "You're stupid!" "You're ugly!" They quickly intensified. I boldly proclaimed that the other girl looked like she had been burned by a dragon's fire, then eaten by the dragon, sent through its intestines, regurgitated, eaten again, and then pooped out its backend. She looked me in the eye, took a step down, and without yelling, said, "Well, at least I know who my real parents are."

Reflecting on this moment, I don't believe the girl's stabbing remark derived from her own cruelty or creativity. Connecting with other adoptees as a teenager and young adult, I have heard numerous stories that bear a disturbing resemblance to mine. As I have undertaken the study of religion and Christian theology, I realize that the other girl simply repeated to me the assumptions common to the long history of Christian doctrine and its legal tradition: adoptive relationships are inherently inferior to biological relationships. Rather than describing my own beautiful, unique experience of family, Christian theology has been interpreted to convey the message that adoptive relationships should be pitied and hidden away.

As I pursue the question of how distinctions between adoptive and biological relationships arose, I am aware that the significance of the topic I am analyzing first emerged from my own experience as a Chinese adoptee. Then, in my formal study of the history of Christian theology, and especially its ethics of adoption, I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the implicit prioritization of biological relationships over others. While studying the philosophical

traditions of my own Chinese heritage, it occurred to me that the Neo-Confucian tradition might have something new to offer Christian adoption ethics. Thus, I undertook a comparative study of how the two traditions have understood the family and how relationships are construed in society. In the Christian tradition, adoptive relationships have often been depicted as “relationships of convenience”—that is, as a backup plan should biological procreation fail and a way to further one’s own relationship with God by fulfilling Jesus’ call to care for the widows and orphans. Karin Evans, an American adoptive parent of a Chinese daughter, refers to this attitude in her observations of international and transracial adoptive families interacting with the general public in her book, *The Lost Daughters of China*.<sup>1</sup> She observes that there is an “all-too-common remark, for instance, that these children [Chinese adoptees] are ‘lucky’ to have been ‘rescued’ by their American parents.”<sup>2</sup> While not all adoptive parents are as knowledgeable as Evans on the problems with analogizing adoption to the Christian mission to care for orphans, even without being an adoptee herself, she still detects problems in how adoption is perceived and received by Western society.

To begin theologizing about adoption in a way that reflects God’s love for humanity, theologies of adoption must contain a holistic understanding of adoptive relationships that acknowledge and accept both the spiritual and economic realities of adoptive relationships. In my analysis, I will argue that Christian thinking has lacked such a grounding, but a new conception of how humans live in harmony with each other and the world can be found by looking to Neo-Confucianism, and especially to Zhang Zai’s concept of *qi*. After a brief background of the development of adoption law in the West, I will compare the ethics of adoption in the Christian tradition and in Neo-Confucianism. Finally, I will examine how Zhang

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<sup>1</sup> Karin Evans, *The Lost Daughters of China* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Evans, *The Lost Daughters*, 192.

Zai's concept of *qi* in Neo-Confucianism can provide a new theoretical foundation for Christianity to reframe how it conceptualizes adoption.

### **The problem**

The primary problem I have found with the texts of Christian ethics and Western legal traditions have depicted adoptive relationships is that they have often conveyed the message (whether intentional or unintentional) that adoptive relationships are inferior to biological relationships. Biological relationships, in contrast to adoptive ones, are perceived as naturally occurring; they are the universal standard and the norm for parent-child relationships. The theory of maternal attachment illustrates this idea. Jeanne L. Alhusen *et al.*'s article, "A Longitudinal Study of Maternal Attachment and Infant Developmental Outcomes," examines the significance of maternal attachment in the development of children.<sup>3</sup> As one of their premises, they state that "maternal attachment is a biologically-driven concept, inherent within humans and other primates, designed to preserve the species through nurturing and protective behaviors."<sup>4</sup> These findings are significant because they help promote proper nurturing and protective behaviors towards infants and children in light of postpartum depression and child neglect, but when applied to adoption, adoptions can be thought of as lacking something irreplaceable. The result is that, as theologian Gary Warren Deddo explains, "adoption is often thought of as being clearly second best, as being a kind of fiction."<sup>5</sup> From early Roman and canonical law to the time of Karl Barth, Christian theology has frequently helped propagate the view that adoptive

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<sup>3</sup> Jeanne L. Alhusen, Matthew J. Hayat, and Deborah Gross, "A Longitudinal Study of Maternal Attachment and Infant Developmental Outcomes," *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 16, no. 6 (December 2013): 10.1007/s00737-013-0357-58, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-013-0357-8>.

<sup>4</sup> Alhusen, Hayat, and Gross, "A Longitudinal Study."

<sup>5</sup> Gary Warren Deddo, "Karl Barth's Special Ethics of Parents and Children in the Light of His Trinitarian Theological Anthropology" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1990), 298, [https://eu03.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/delivery/44ABE\\_INST/12153439070005941](https://eu03.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/delivery/44ABE_INST/12153439070005941).

relationships are more akin to a business deal, too different from biological relationships to be loving parent-child relationships. The result is that the Christian tradition in the West has often diminished the value of adoptive relationships compared to biological ones.

According to Adoption Network, a U.S. domestic adoption agency, nearly seven million Americans are adopted, and an astounding 100 million Americans have an immediate family member who is adopted.<sup>6</sup> But despite adoption's overwhelming presence and social reality, current research and discussion of Christian ethics of adoption is lacking in Christian theology and ethics. Even less attention has been focused specifically on adoption as it has been conceptually defined throughout the evolution of the Christian tradition. The few published works that do exist tend to analyze adoption in light of God's divine adoption of humanity, adoption compared to the Trinitarian relationship, and adoption as a desirable choice as modeled by Jesus' social ethics.

To begin the task of redefining Western Christian conceptions of adoption, I will begin by analyzing Thomas Aquinas' writings in his *Commentary on the Sentences* and *Summa Theologiae*, and Karl Barth's writings in the *Church Dogmatics*, which represent two major trajectories in Christian thinking about adoption. I will then introduce Neo-Confucianism and Zhang Zai's notion of *qi*. Understanding adoption as it exists in the Christian tradition first makes it easier to notice how Neo-Confucianism and Zhang Zai deviates from and aligns with Christian ethics of adoption. I will examine Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi* and its emphasis on the importance of differences in relationships. Finally, I will suggest a way of integrating Zhang's understanding of *qi* into a Christian vision of reality and discuss the consequences it would have for our theory and praxis of adoption.

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<sup>6</sup> "US Adoption Statistics," Adoption Network, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://adoptionnetwork.com/adoption-statistics>.

## **Establishing a common vocabulary**

In Western classifications of belief systems under “religion” or “philosophy,” Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism are often classified as philosophies. However, the distinction between these two fields can be ambiguous. I classify Neo-Confucianism as a religion and a philosophy, but my goal is not to liken Neo-Confucianism to Western concepts as a form of religious imperialism or to make any comparative work easier. Instead, my aim is to uplift and affirm the differences that characterize Asian religious traditions, differences that have often led to their classification as “philosophies” only in comparison to Western “religions.” Many scholars of religion agree that the term “religion” is not a timeless, universal concept that transcends language and culture. Brent Nongbri, in *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, writes that the term was created to encourage religious pluralism and balance Europe’s religious and political wars, in addition to being utilized as a classification system to help Western minds process the foreign practices and cultures they encountered.<sup>7</sup> For Chinese belief systems in America specifically, classifying Confucianism as a philosophy also helped Americans distinguish themselves as racially superior to Chinese people, who were often depicted as godless and nonreligious by white Christian nationalism during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the case of Neo-Confucianism, forcing it to fit into a specific definition of the term “religion” for the purposes of comparative study may be perceived as a form of religious colonialism. However, looking to Kwok Pui-lan’s exhortation for flexibility when navigating linguistic and definitional barriers, I follow Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald in their

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<sup>7</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 15-24.

classification of Neo-Confucianism as a religion *and* a philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Kwok notes that Asian religious traditions are more concerned with what one practices in life, rather than belief in a deity, and while many definitions of religion orbit around belief in a deity, Neo-Confucianism contains the religious rituals and subjectivity typical of traditional religions and a systematic investigation of the world found in philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Still, it is important to note that Neo-Confucianism's loose connection to deities should not be considered nonreligious. Its concern for the spiritual world appears in its emphasis on ancestral veneration, and even without ancestral veneration, Neo-Confucianism shares the functions of faith traditions that are widely accepted as "religions." By utilizing the classification of Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald, who classify Neo-Confucianism as a religion *and* a philosophy, Neo-Confucianism is able to be understood as more than a way of rationalizing the world.<sup>10</sup> Forcing ourselves to understand Neo-Confucianism as a philosophy only limits our acceptance of it as a tradition that plays a similar role in its followers' lives as orthodox religions. It is holistic, encompassing both theory and praxis through a shared set of beliefs, social ethics, rituals, and traditions, similar to Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and other orthodox faith traditions.

To problematize the ways "religion" is defined, Nongbri traces the development of the term "religion" in 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. During the turbulent "Wars of Religion" in medieval Europe, tension between Christian sects and denominations emerged, particularly between Catholics and Protestants and between the various Protestant groups.<sup>11</sup> Each group sought to establish itself as the *vera religio*, or the "genuine worship."<sup>12</sup> The competition among Christians in Europe was violent, and as rulers were unsuccessful in achieving religious uniformity, the

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen C. Angle and Justin Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Pui-lan Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 68.

<sup>10</sup> Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 87-91.

<sup>12</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 87.

rulers sought the next-best solution: a “highly personalized notion of religion that focused on the salvation of the individual soul.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike in the past, religion became a private matter, having no bearing on political matters, in order to pacify a region torn apart by religious conflict and enable distinct groups to coexist somewhat peacefully.<sup>14</sup>

While I am unsatisfied with the use of “religion” to describe Neo-Confucianism, considering its history, I am also unsure of how to adequately describe Neo-Confucianism and similar Chinese religions-philosophies with an English vocabulary that does not contain words that fully convey the nature and function of these systems. Failed attempts to find more appropriate descriptors have led scholars, such as Stephen Bush, to focus on redefining what encompasses a religion, rather than trying to replace the word entirely.<sup>15</sup> In silent agreement with this approach, many Asian and Asian American theologians often continue to use religion to reference Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Having no adequate Chinese translation for religion, God, and other theological terms, Chloë Starr, in her book, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context*, addresses the linguistic struggles of Chinese theologians who must “write of and conceive of a Christian God in a language in which the concepts did not readily exist and in literary forms that bore little relation to those in which they themselves had inherited the gospel.”<sup>16</sup>

The search for adequate translations of biblical concepts has been ongoing since the Old Testament because of Judaism’s own history of syncretizing with local cultures. As the Israelites encountered new nations of people through migration, war, imperialism, early Judaism developed according to its surroundings, though sometimes this occurred against the advice of

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<sup>13</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 100-101.

<sup>14</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen S. Bush, *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power*, Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (Yale University Press, 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gxxpk9>, 1.



the prophets. For one example, the book of Zephaniah features oracles of judgment proclaimed against Judah and Jerusalem. Zephaniah joins other minor prophets in warning the Israelite people about the disastrous “Day of the Lord” that awaits Judah as a result of their sins.<sup>17</sup> One of the sins Zephaniah refers to is Judah’s syncretism with foreign cultures. The Assyrians controlled Judah and its kings during the 7th century B.C.E., and even though the death of the Assyrian ruler, Ashurbanipal, around 627 B.C.E. weakened Assyria’s status as a world power, its cultural influence on Judah’s religious life remained strong enough to evoke Zephaniah’s criticism and YHWH’s wrath.<sup>18</sup> Before the Babylonian exile, Judah’s identity and relationship to YHWH were perceived as being tied to the physical land and the physical city of Jerusalem. Therefore, cultural syncretism was seen as a threat that brought the people further away from being in relationship with YHWH.

During the decades of the early Jewish-Christian church following Jesus’ death, as the Hellenistic world incorporated the beliefs and traditions of Judaism and Jewish-Christians into its worldview, the tensions exhibited in Zephaniah continued. One of the prominent themes in Paul’s letters concerns cultivating relationships among the Jews and Gentiles. Yet, unlike contemporary scholars trying to bridge the cultural divide between East and West, the Hellenistic world’s efforts to cross cultural and linguistic translations were aided by its geographical proximity to the Jewish-Christian church (bringing the groups into constant, intimate interactions with the other) and the lack of racial politics involved. While the history and complexity of Christian syncretism involves more issues than I can explore in this paper, crossing cultural barriers—whether linguistic, religious, or cultural—between the white, Western world and the

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<sup>17</sup> Carol J. Dempsey, *Amos, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk: Volume 15*, New Collegeville Bible Commentary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 54, <https://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzE0NDQ2MTFFX0FO0?sid=2e200e14-eb97-4053-b91b-5537c5447eb0@pdc-v-sessmgr02&vid=3&format=EK&rid=3>.

<sup>18</sup> Dempsey, *Amos, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk: Volume 15*, 54.

nonwhite world today is intertwined with the structures of racism and white supremacy which have positioned nonwhite cultures and beliefs as inferior. This is a unique obstacle the Hellenistic world and Paul did not encounter as they sought out the ethics of doing God's will.

While linguists continue the search for more accurate descriptions, it is best to simply acknowledge the limitations inherent in the word. The implications of contradictory definitions of religion are exemplified in the differences between the number of Chinese people who self-identify as religious and the far smaller number of Chinese people identified by Western researchers as religious.<sup>19</sup> The reason for China's supposed "heathen" people is not a result of people who are unconcerned with spiritual or ontological matters, but because of Eurocentric definitions of the characteristics and nature of religions. During my first college ministry event in my freshman year, a pastor's child introduced herself to me by sharing her dream job when she was 10-years old. With a smile on her face, she told me, a young Chinese woman, her dream job was to go to China to "convert the heathens." Within Christian academia and local churches, the assumption that Chinese people are atheists is not typically expressed with a term as concise and biting as "heathen," but it still undergirds many Christian groups in the West. The pastor's child who was relating her childhood hopes to me was not sharing a complete reflection of her own individual self, but the community and ideologies she had absorbed as a child and picked up from the influences in her life. Her statement to me was not a random act of ignorance, but a reflection of a larger issue within Christian communities.

## **Methodology**

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<sup>19</sup> Rodney Stark and Xiuhua Wang, *A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015), 1-5, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nlebk&AN=987615&scope=site&custid=s5615486>.

As society has become more aware and receptive to the cultural and religious diversity present in the Western world, and especially the United States, the need for comparative theology to establish interfaith dialogues have become vital for groups working towards inclusivity and social change. Using comparative theology to rethink adoption ethics allows Christianity to look for new theories on the family outside of itself without critiquing other cultures. Francis X. Clooney, one of the pioneering scholars of comparative theology, distinguishes between comparative religion and comparative theology according to the scholar's relationship to the religions they are examining.<sup>20</sup> Comparative religion compares two religions to better understand both traditions, but comparative theology is rooted in a particular faith tradition or religion and seeks new encounters with other religions and philosophies to better understand itself. My research looks to Neo-Confucianism to uncover a new way of comprehending Christian ethics of adoption, and I conduct this analysis as a Christian for other Christians.

In my analysis, I will discuss how Christian ethics may change, not Confucianism or Chinese culture. By comparing religious doctrines and teachings that originated from the West and then the East, my research examines the theoretical foundations of Confucian ethics on family and adoptive relationships while remaining rooted in the goal of reframing Christian ethics of adoption that imply adoption is inferior to biological relationships. While Confucianism and Chinese culture do not exist as a sharp dichotomy to Christianity – as they have often been framed – they do offer a different perspective on relational ethics and the construction of relationships.

The practical significance of comparative theology is evident in its ability to lead Christian ethics to a stronger self-understanding of the ways Christians define and live out the principles

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<sup>20</sup> Francis X. Clooney, Personal Communication, October 2021.

they believe in.<sup>21</sup> The little research in comparative theology that analyzes Christianity and the broader Chinese heritage has opened up new dimensions of the Christian faith to audiences in the West. One such article written about 30 years ago is “The Dragon and the Lamb: Chinese Festivals in the Life of Chinese Canadian/American Christians” by Anne Greer Ng.<sup>22</sup> Ng’s article argues that Chinese Christians with a stronger cultural identity have a stronger Christian faith, and she demonstrates this by exploring the similarities between Chinese festivals and Christian traditions. Additionally, Kwok Pui-lan, as an Asian American feminist, often draws on comparative theology and Asian culture in her works to find a new language for theology that liberates all women. Both of these scholars successfully show how Asian culture and traditions can coexist with, and even enhance, one’s Christian faith. However, Kwok recognizes that comparative research between Asian culture and Christianity is scarce, and she exhorts theology’s need for it. While our goals are different – Kwok aims to liberate women by changing our culture and I, adoptees by changing our ethics – my research responds to Kwok’s call for more comparative work.

Bridging an understanding between Christianity and Confucianism via ethics helps enrich the Western Christian community as it reconceptualizes its definitions of a “real”<sup>23</sup> family while also undoing the binary relationship that has historically existed between Chinese and Western culture. Both cultures have a history of abuse towards adoptees and parentless children, but for differing reasons. From my experiences meeting domestic and international adoptees in the United States, and being an international adoptee myself, I know that adoptive relationships have the potential to be loving relationships equal in value to all biological relationships, but they are

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<sup>21</sup> S. Mark Heim, “Comparative Theology at Twenty-Five: The End of the Beginning,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 1 (2019): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12450>.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Greer Ng, “The Dragon and the Lamb: Chinese Festivals in the Life of Chinese Canadian/American Christians,” *Religious Education* 84, no. 3 (1989): 368–83.

<sup>23</sup> I use the term “real” here in quotations to question and counter the use of real as a colloquial descriptor to differentiate describe biological families and birth parents.

often undermined by the implicit inferiority of adoptive relationships in our deepest cultural and ethical assumptions.

## ADOPTION IN THE WEST

To be legitimized in society and afforded the rights of a biological child, adoptees must undergo the legal process of adoption and be recognized by the state. The law thus insinuates itself into adoptive relationships in a way that it does not necessarily insinuate itself into biological relationships. Acknowledging the legal dimensions of adoption is important to understanding the ways it differs from biological relationships, but the incorporation of this difference should not make it inferior to biological relationships or be taken as the primary way adoptive relationships can be characterized. Additionally, since all relationships contain a spiritual element that connects us to others in an intangible way, adoptive relationships also consist of a spiritual aspect in which parent-child relationships are legitimized by the connections of love and emotion. However, unlike biological relationships, the spiritual relationship in adoption is not reinforced by a shared kinship by blood. Bringing these two traits of adoptive relationships into harmony with one another without discrediting the other is the modern struggle. The Bible, which I will explore in the next section, has often contributed to the current tension between the spiritual and economic aspects of adoptive relationships because of the way many Christians have interpreted its depictions of the family and relationships. Once I have established the biblical foundation for Christian adoption ethics, I will provide a brief background on Western adoption law. Western adoption law was developed in conjunction with religious influences. Finally, with the historical development of adoption in the Christian West laid out, I will look at the ethics of adoption found in the works of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth.

## **Themes pertaining to adoptive relationships in the Bible**

Before diving into the Christian tradition, it is important to look at the Bible, the original text and inspiration for the Christian tradition. From there, it is possible to note where subsequent Christian thinkers and theologians align or deviate from the established precedents. Within the Old and New Testaments, there are many passages pertinent to adoption, family relationships, and how humans ought to relate to one another. Arguably, one of the major themes of the Bible is how humans should be in community and fellowship with one another. While the Bible does include discourses on adoption and relational ethics, I will try to show how many of these passages also defer to a shared essence or humanity to encourage fellowship among humans. Other passages discuss adoption, but as a function of economics. Even though these subthemes do reveal a truth about adoption, harsh though it may be, they become problematic when used to validate adoptive relationships.

From the very beginning of the Bible, in the creation stories of Genesis 1-2, humankind is distinguished from the rest of creation as creatures made “in our [God’s] image, according to our [God’s] likeness” (Genesis 1:26, NRSV). In connection to the question of adoption, Genesis 1:26 is significant because it provides evidence for a universal human essence that Christian theologians can interpret as a reason for why humans should care for their fellow humans. Genesis 1:26 is characterized by its “pervasive concern for kinship and family,” as the “various dimensions of family life belong within the sphere of God’s concern.”<sup>24</sup> Considering the historical context in which the creation stories were written in, this theme speaks to the needs of the Israelite people of the time. The creation stories are believed to have been compiled during

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<sup>24</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 329.

the Babylonian exile of the southern kingdom, Judah, around 586 B.C.E. As the struggling Jewish diaspora fought to retain their national identity as God's chosen people, seeking out an eschatological hope, they composed a written tradition for their creation stories, stories that had previously been oral traditions. By doing so, they hoped to unite their community in the midst of Babylon's grandeur and cultural influence surrounding them. While the theme that Genesis 1-2 conveys (that all humans are made in the image of God, and thus, we are all connected by this special humanity and responsible for each other's wellbeing) is not problematic when interpreted in light of its original intent, when legitimizing adoptive relationships, appealing to our shared humanity should not be invoked. When applied to adoption, a reliance on a shared humanity or essence downplays our differences, seeking unity *in spite of* and through *overcoming* differences.

In the New Testament, the theme of our shared humanity is adjusted slightly in Matthew 12:46-50. In Jesus' response to a bystander's comment that Jesus' mother and brothers are waiting for him, Jesus declares, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (Matthew 12:48). Jesus then goes on to redefine his family as "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother (Matt. 12:49). In this short passage, Jesus challenges biology as the basis of a family, reflecting the author of Matthew's concentration on the Jewish-Christian identity and community. Thus, Jesus' disciples are those who do the will of God, and by extension, they are also inducted into the "family of God" as "members of the Christian community."<sup>25</sup> Our true family includes those who do the will of God, which is preceded by sharing a belief in God. The theme of a shared *something* that began in Genesis 1-2 continues in this passage. For Matthew's audience, which primarily consisted of Jewish Christians who were not members of the social elite, Jesus' teaching is radical because it critiques the societal belief

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<sup>25</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 298.

that bloodlines are the source of wealth and power. Instead, it suggests following God's will as the source of eternal life. Matthew's redefinition of the family in the passage establishes a foundation for a more liberating formulation of what constitutes a family, and for Christian contexts, it can be. Viewing a shared faith and desire to follow the will of God as the basis for defining a family proves just as problematic as appeals to shared humanity. This interpretation provides the hope for a perspective of adoptive relationships that accepts the ways adoption is unique, but for Christians who are adopting, it has been used to enforce a Christian identity on adoptees in order for them to be considered a member of their adoptive family. As long as similarities in something, whether it is our human essence or faith, are a requisite of defining family, the meaning and beauty in our differences (which will vary by interpretations) lose meaning and value in the context of adoption. This will become clearer in later sections that explore the history of international adoption, which has its roots in Christian missionary efforts to Asian countries.

A second theme that surfaces in biblical excerpts on relationships and adoption is adoption as a tool of economics. Within the Old Testament, the Book of the Covenant<sup>26</sup> details rulings for how the Israelites are to handle legal disputes and other economic, social, and religious matters. This includes the treatment of slaves in Exodus 21, which discusses a section of laws concerning the treatment of female slaves. The law in Exodus 21 is enunciated with four applicable scenarios in which the "female slave is to be treated differently."<sup>27</sup> For female slaves who are adopted as biological daughters, the law declares, "If he [the master] designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter" (Exodus 21:9). Compared to other ancient near eastern legal codes governing slaves, the law outlined in Exodus shows that the "community is

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<sup>26</sup> The Book of the Covenant is the name for the text from Exodus 20:22-23:19. It consists of the second set of law codes given to Moses by God at Mount Sinai.

<sup>27</sup> *The New Interpreter's*, I:862.



aware of the tension between human rights and economic power.”<sup>28</sup> By stipulating those female slaves who are adopted for the purposes of marriage are to be treated as daughters, the Book of the Covenant helps protect the few economic and legal rights of the female slave. Nevertheless, in the economy of the Israelites, the *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* recognizes the influence of human temptations within the law, writing:

Clearly the law wants to set limits to the practice of debt bondage. But it is equally clear that it goes about the problem in a cowardly way, submitting the claims of human dignity to the realities of the economy. The position taken is ‘reformist,’ desiring to make debt slavery more palatable and humane, but reluctant to criticize or assault the practice directly and in principle.<sup>29</sup>

For the purposes of analyzing attitudes towards adoption today, this passage helps reinforce the idea that adoption is a relationship of convenience, intended to serve the interests of those who are adopting rather than the adoptees. Even though the arrangement outlined in Exodus 21:9 is intended to protect the welfare of female slaves intended to become a daughter-in-law, the adoption of slave girls for the purposes of marriage occurs in response to the adoptive family’s need for a childbearing bride. Although the female slave gains status through the adoption, the primary purpose of the adoption is not concerned with the interests of the female slave, and in each of the four scenarios outlining how to deal with female slaves, the female slave is not fully regarded as her own person.<sup>30</sup> Her fate is linked to her relationship with a man. Additionally, as a legal code placed within a religious tradition, adoption law intersects with the legal and religious realm. The result is that Exodus 21:9 sets a precedent for validating adoption as an economic tool that is supported by religion. The notion of adoption as a topic belonging to

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<sup>28</sup> *The New Interpreter’s* I:873.

<sup>29</sup> *The New Interpreter’s*, I:862.

<sup>30</sup> *The New Interpreter’s*, I:862.

the realm of law and economics only should be discontinued, but Exodus 21:9 illustrates how the Christian tradition has a biblical foundation for the inferiority of adoptive relationships because it connects adoption with the degrading practice of adopting female slaves bought for marriage.

While the two themes previously discussed have led to interpretations of adoption that diminish the value of adoptive relationships in later theology and the Christian tradition, there is another theme in the Bible that has been wrongfully used by Christians to justify adoption: the theme of God's adoption of humanity and Jesus. The message of God's adoption comes to light in the New Testament following the revelation and resurrection of Jesus. One example of this is found in Galatians 4:1-7, which says,

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Here, Paul uses the metaphor of inheritance and God's adoption of all humans to address the situation of the Galatian church, which was struggling to unite Jews and Gentiles.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Paul portrays all humanity as being in slavery before God's "dramatic intervention" of sending Jesus.<sup>32</sup> While Paul seeks to unite the Jews and Gentiles by extending God's agape love to all, he does so by contrasting the natural relationship of God's *own* son with God's adoption of

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<sup>31</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, vol. XI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 284.

<sup>32</sup> *The New Interpreter's*, XI:283.

humanity.<sup>33</sup> In later Christian interpretations of this passage, it is problematic for adoption, as Jesus, God's "own Son" is portrayed as being set apart from those who are adopted. In human-human adoption, this can be seen in relationships where adoptees are part of a family, and yet, they are *a part* from that family.

There is a plethora of other biblical passages that may fit into the subthemes that have been mentioned, and this list is not all-inclusive. But what is significant about these subthemes is that they provide room for later Christian thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, to conceptualize adoption through an economic lens only and to base familial relationships on having a shared identity. The struggle Christian ethics of adoption has faced in expanding its ethics may be partially attributed to the way Western Christians comprehend and interpret legal and religious texts, which the *NIBC* affirms in a quote found in volume I: "Just as the church has been, in my judgement, excessively busy in recent times stating 'absolutes,' so also conversation about civil law has fallen into an advocacy of strict constructionism that pretends that law has a once-for-all meaning and intention."<sup>34</sup> With constrained and limited perceptions of adoption educating Western approaches to adoption, and unsuitable applications of biblical passages to social issues, adoption praxis has been susceptible to supporting assimilationist attitudes and stigmatizing adoptive relationships.

### **History of Western adoption law and legal tradition**

Having examined adoption and relationships as they are described in the Bible, we can turn to the history of Western adoption law and its traditions in light of Christianity's influence. Since the start of the common era, Christian theologians and lawyers have pondered the value of the

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<sup>33</sup> *The New Interpreter's*, XI:284.

<sup>34</sup> *The New Interpreter's*, I:872.

adoptive relationship in comparison to “natural,” or biological, relationships to arrange the rights of inheritances and heirs. Drawing from the legislative precedents of the Roman empire and Europe, America’s current struggle with adoption may be attributed to two sources: the legal influences of Greco-Roman society and religious conceptions of adoption law.

In Greco-Roman law codes from the 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, adoption laws framed the value of the adoptive relationship in comparison to “natural,” or biological, relationships to govern the rights of inheritances and heirs. During this period in the early church’s history, *adrogratio* adoption, or formal adoption, was centered around economics and meeting the needs of adoptive parents, who were aristocratic Roman citizens and could attain the emperor’s approval, which was required for *adrogratio* adoptions.<sup>35</sup> *Adrogratio* adoption was for males only, and the exclusivity of this adoption leads some scholars to claim that adoption during Roman times was not intended to address child abandonment, which was a “regular and depressing feature of Roman life.”<sup>36</sup> Rather, the purpose of *adrogratio* adoption was to ensure that eligible adoptive parents had an heir. A second, informal type of adoption was known as “simple adoption” because it could be approved by local officials, and it was how daughters were able to be adopted.<sup>37</sup> The distinctions between these two types of legal adoption are drawn upon in western Europe’s reformation of the legal system and canon law during the Middle Ages, providing the context that Thomas Aquinas responds to.<sup>38</sup>

By the post-classical era, Christianity had become a prominent voice in government and in determining law and social ethics. Christian canonists were then able to conceive an ethics of

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<sup>35</sup> Pollack, Daniel, *et al.*, “Classical Religious Perspectives of Adoption Law,” *Notre Dame Law Review* 79, no. 2 (2004): 713, <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndlr/vol79/iss2/5>. This article appeared with a typographical mistake in the title as “Classical Religious Perpectives of Adoption Law.” I have corrected the mistake in my citations throughout this paper.

<sup>36</sup> Pollack, et al., “Classical Religious Perspectives,” 713.

<sup>37</sup> Pollack, et al., “Classical Religious Perspectives,” 714.

<sup>38</sup> Pollack, et al., “Classical Religious Perspectives,” 714.

adoption that incorporated Christian tradition with the legal precedents enacted during the classical period. Drawing from aspects of Roman law, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Rufinus, a Roman lawyer, and Tancred, Prince of Galilee, reinforced parent-centric definitions of adoption that the theologian Thomas Aquinas would later draw on in his commentary on Lombard's *Sentences* and his *Summa Theologiae*. Together, these thinkers reemphasized the differences between formal and informal adoptions and further specified rules dictating who is eligible to adopt. More importantly, as Pollack *et al.* note, the writings of these canonists ensured that adoption was embedded in the legal life and reality of medieval Europe.<sup>39</sup> Thus, they have had long-lasting effects on adoption law and public sentiments towards adoption.

In the United States, Ellen Herman makes the important observation that adoption's "close association with humanitarianism, upward mobility, and infertility" is a recent development.<sup>40</sup> The parent-centric adoption policies of Greco-Roman society and the Middle Ages continued into America's societal beliefs on adoption and orphans. In 1854, Charles Long Brace formed the Children's Aid Society of New York City to place children of the urban poor in "better" family settings in the American Midwest and West.<sup>41</sup> However, many of the children Brace came from Catholic backgrounds and were being placed with Protestant families.<sup>42</sup> In light of Brace's contempt for Catholicism, who believed that Catholicism is inferior to Protestantism, Pollack *et al.* state that Brace's outwardly charitable efforts have been interpreted as efforts to convert Catholic children to Protestantism, which prompted Catholics to establish Catholic social services.<sup>43</sup> While Brace's charity to children of the urban poor may be centered on the welfare of

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<sup>39</sup> Pollack, *et al.*, "Classical Religious Perspectives," 719.

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Herman, "Adoption History: Adoption History in Brief," The Adoption History Project, 2012, <https://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/adoptionhistbrief.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Pollack, *et al.*, "Classical Religious Perspectives," 724.

<sup>42</sup> Pollack, *et al.*, "Classical Religious Perspectives," 724.

<sup>43</sup> Pollack, *et al.*, "Classical Religious Perspectives," 724.

the child—a significant shift in adoption—his mission work is also problematic because it provided a way for Brace to enact his own religious agenda.

With the aftermath of World War II causing an increase in international adoptions and transracial families, adoption became a fairly visible social reality as American families began taking in children from countries ravaged by war.<sup>44</sup> With adoptees in America coming from backgrounds considered less desirable, stigma surrounding foster children and adoptees still exists. Yet, an increasing percentage of the American population is adopted, and more families are choosing to foster and/or adopt children. With the ideals of the nuclear family becoming a distant social reality, in order to remain relevant to modern families, Christian doctrine and practices pertaining to family ethics and adoption must be equipped with a thorough understanding of adoption in the Christian tradition to arrive at an understanding of adoption that is more reflective of God’s love and inclusivity.

The Christian thinkers I will analyze, Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, write about adoption according to their circumstances, when questions of race, transracial and transcontinental adoptions, and white saviorism were not a part of adoption processes. However, Christian discussions surrounding adoption largely continue to reflect the theologies presented by Aquinas and Barth. Christian ethics require more substantial reworkings of adoption ethics, and adoption ethics in Christianity should be updated to reflect the needs of modern adoption, seeking out contemporary voices who are able to address modern issues in adoption that were not present when Aquinas and Barth were writing. Still, in order to understand why modern Christian approaches to adoption are problematic, we need to understand how, as a result of Christian ethics looking to older conceptions of adoption that are not equipped to navigate modern issues in adoption, the theologies of Aquinas and Barth have communicated the

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<sup>44</sup> Herman, “Adoption History.”

inferiority of adoptive relationships, reinforcing attitudes of assimilation and white saviorism in adoption.

### **Thomas Aquinas on adoption**

As evidenced by Thomas Aquinas' 13<sup>th</sup>-century text, *Commentary on the Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the topic of legal adoption, in which children may be transferred from one set of guardians into the responsibility of others, is by no account a new phenomenon. Peter Lombard set the precedent for medieval discussions of adoption by asking whether Jesus was God's adopted son, and Pollack *et al.* propose that Aquinas further developed Lombard's ideas by connecting adoption with love.<sup>45</sup> Distinction 42, question 2, articles 1-3 of Lombard's *Commentary* directly address the definition of adoption, its purpose, and who is eligible to adopt, which Dominican scholars would later include verbatim as a part of the Supplement of the *Summa Theologiae*.

In article 1, Aquinas argues that adoption is rightfully defined as, "the legal assumption of a stranger as a son or grandson, and so forth."<sup>46</sup> Drawing from Europe's canon law and its Greco-Roman influence, Aquinas distinguishes between adoption by adrogation and simple adoption, with both types centering adoption around the needs of the adoptive parents. The difference between these two types of adoption, besides the formality of the adoption process, is that under adrogation, the adopted child consents to the adoption and "perfectly imitates natural sonship," having a full share in their adoptive parent's inheritances without needing a will to specify this.<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, a child who is adopted through simple adoption is not guaranteed

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<sup>45</sup> Pollack, *et al.*, "Classical Religious Perspectives," 718.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Aquinas, "Adoptive Relationship," in *Book IV, Distinctions 26-42*, trans. by Beth Mortensen, vol. 9 of *Commentary on the Sentences* (Aquinas Institute, 2018), 42.2.1, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.IV.D42.Q2.A1>.

<sup>47</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary IV*, 42.2.1.

to receive an inheritance from their adoptive parents.<sup>48</sup> With the distinctions between the types of adoption based on matters of inheritance, Aquinas continues his argument by writing that “adoption is ordered to the succession to an inheritance, and thus it only applies to those who have the power of disposing of their inheritance.”<sup>49</sup> For contemporary times, this interpretation of adoption is economically-grounded, and it is not in line with modern conceptions of love in parent-child relationships. Pollack *et al.*’s claim that Aquinas connects adoption with love, but while Aquinas’ formulation of adoption may have been progressive for his social and historical context, it no longer provides an adequate basis for defining adoptive relationships because adoption is not a matter of economics and legislation alone.

Besides economics, gender and ability to procreate also play a role in shaping Aquinas’ definition of adoption. In addition to males being the only eligible recipients of *adrogatio* adoption, women are able to adopt under simple adoption only since they are not legally independent (*sui juris*) and therefore unable to pass on an inheritance.<sup>50</sup> However, women are not the only demographics affected by Aquinas’ definition of adoption. In article 1, Aquinas writes that “adoption was instituted as a consolation for the loss of children.”<sup>51</sup> Another English translation of the original Latin text renders this phrase as, “adoption was introduced as a solace for children lost.”<sup>52</sup> Even without the clarification of the original Latin, in his reply to objection 6, Aquinas explicitly frames adoption’s purpose around meeting the needs of adoptive parents. More specifically, Aquinas is concerned with those who have known the joys of children, but lost them. Believing that “greater is sorrow for children lost than for children one has never

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<sup>48</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary IV*, 42.2.1.

<sup>49</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary IV*, 42.2.1.

<sup>50</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary IV*, 42.2.1.

<sup>51</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary IV*, 42.2.1.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “Legal Relationship, Which Is by Adoption,” in *The “Summa theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas Supplement*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920 (New Advent, 2008), 57.1, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/5057.htm>.



had,”<sup>53</sup> Aquinas also argues that eunuchs and the impotent, “those having an impediment to generation,”<sup>54</sup> should abstain from adopting because they “do not need consolation for their lack of children.”<sup>55</sup> Despite abandoned children being a commonality of the Middle Ages, Aquinas restricts eligible adoptive parents to an exclusive group, showing his concerns not for children and their need for familial love, but for parents who desire to replace the children they have lost.

Synthesizing Aquinas’ writings on legal adoption with that of charity, found in question 26, articles 8, 9, and 11, Aquinas’ arguments on whom we ought to love more also act in contradiction to his arguments for adoption. In article 8, Aquinas asks whether we should love blood-related kin more than others, and answers that we should. To support his claim, Aquinas defers to his postulations on the degrees of love, which say that, “we should measure the love of different persons according to the different kinds of union... accordingly we must say that friendship among blood relations is based upon their connection by natural origin.”<sup>56</sup> This means that the way we are connected to a person, or what our relationship is based on, determines the intensity of our love for them. Aquinas reinforces his notion of the degrees of love in relation to how one is connected with others to explain why a man should not love his children more than his father in article 9, and why a man should not love his wife more than his parents in article 11.<sup>57</sup> The concept of various degrees of love allows for comparisons between familial and friendly love, and Aquinas’ response helps establish a standard of social etiquette and intimacy as proper to the one with whom one is interacting.

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<sup>53</sup> Aquinas, *ST* Supplement, 57.1.

<sup>54</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary IV*, 42.2.1.

<sup>55</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary IV*, 42.2.1.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “The Order of Charity,” in *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas II-II*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920 (New Advent, 2008), 26.8., <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3026.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Aquinas, *ST II-II*, 26.9,11.

Ultimately though, Aquinas bases the foundation of human love on a common biological substance shared by those in union. The focus on connections of blood is upheld by Aquinas' articulations of adoption ethics. Aquinas' articles on adoption and relationships are precise and technical, as the economic and legal traditions he was influenced by are. Aquinian ethics of adoption correspond with biblical laws and ethics, including Exodus 21. For Aquinas and the book of Exodus, relational ethics are economic in nature; they are not wholly grounded in concern for a person's flourishing. In this way, Aquinas' ethics reflect the economics and inheritance-oriented perspectives of adoption found in Exodus 21.

Aquinas' emphasis on biological relations does not come from any attempt to defend Augustinian beliefs in the sexual transmission of sin – this is the opposite of what Aquinas wishes to argue – but from his belief that “a man may from his birth be under a family disgrace, on account of a crime committed by one of his forbears.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, it matters who we are related to, and the crimes of our relatives can impact our own reputation. Even though Aquinas does not attribute this legacy of disgrace to a belief in the sexual transmission of sin, he does maintain the possibility that one can be subject to condemnation on account of their ancestor's actions. Solidifying his stance with the idea that the “union arising from natural origin is prior to, and more stable than, all others, because it is something affecting the very substance,” Aquinas' articles on the adoptive relationship, when viewed in light of his articles on charity, describe a relationship not founded in love, but in economics, because such an intensity of love that is inherent from a natural origin is not possible in adoptive relationships.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “The Cause of Sin, on the Part of Man,” in *The "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas I-II*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920 (New Haven, 2008) 81.1., <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2081.htm>.

<sup>59</sup> Aquinas, *ST II-II*, 26.8.

In modernity, the implications of this statement are seen in a stigma against foster care children and adoptees, with some prospective adoptive parents fearing a potential child may be irrevocably damaged by their birth parent's background. A 2022 poll conducted by the Harris Poll for the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption surveyed American attitudes towards adoption.<sup>60</sup> When asked whether they believe every child is adoptable, two-thirds of adults stated their belief that every child is adoptable.<sup>61</sup> This percentage has risen by 9% from the last time the poll was conducted in 2017.<sup>62</sup>

Viewing Aquinas' doctrine on love, original sin, and charity in conversation with his ethics of adoption, Aquinas' contradictions reveal a rudimentary understanding of adoption that is successful in validating love between adoptees and adoptive parents, but also, it reveals how fundamental Christian doctrines often fail to truly reflect God's love and compassion in the context of adoption praxis. With his focus on a precise distinction between "natural" and "legal" relationships, which are themselves problematic terms, and his exclusive character of adoption and adoption's purpose, Aquinas supports public sentiments on adoption that Gary Warren Deddo critiques, sentiments that Deddo summarizes as follows: "Adoption is often thought of as being clearly second best, as being a kind of fiction. The natural and biological connections are thought of as being more real than other forms of human belonging."<sup>63</sup> The result is a sense of ambiguity concerning Aquinas' opinion on adoption and whether he believes there is a difference in the intensity of love felt between children biologically related to their parents, and adoptees and their adoptive parents. Deddo's claim also helps problematize adoption ethics that

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<sup>60</sup> "2022 US Adoption Attitudes Survey" (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption: The Harris Poll, February 2022), <https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2022-US-Adoption-and-Foster-Care-Attitudes-Report-WEB-Final.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> "2022 US Adoption, 72."

<sup>62</sup> "2022 US Adoption, 72."

<sup>63</sup> Deddo, "Karl Barth's Special Ethics," 298, [https://eu03.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/delivery/44ABE\\_INST/12153439070005941](https://eu03.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/delivery/44ABE_INST/12153439070005941).

associate “natural” with biological relationships because of the hierarchy it creates between “natural” and “unnatural” or “legal” relationships. With this postulation, the modern idea of maternal attachment enters the theological sphere as reasoning for the variation in degrees of love.

### **Karl Barth on adoption**

Seven centuries later, writing about adoption through a vastly different lens than Aquinas, the Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, wrote the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth’s different approach is evident in the very structure of his book: unlike Aquinas, he does not explicitly discuss adoption as a social practice in Christian ethics. Instead, in the fourth part of his third volume in his multivolume series, Barth discusses how humans should exist in fellowship with other humans. In his analysis of the parent-child relationship, Barth immediately begins by redefining parenthood as a spiritual responsibility rather than a physical birthright. In his doctoral thesis on Karl Barth’s family ethics, Gary Warren Deddo paraphrases this claim as, “No one *is* a parent, but *becomes* one on the basis of participating in a certain kind of relationship with a child.”<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, Barth’s emphasis on the spiritual rather than legal nature of parent-child relationships is evocative of Jesus’ definition of family as written in Matthew 12:46-50 and Genesis 1-2, as it relies on arguments that appeal to our shared humanity and having a shared faith. With such an emphasis, it comes as no surprise that Barth dedicates a sizable portion of this text to detailing the parent’s and child’s responsibilities in the relationship, which future Barthian theologians discuss in relation to God’s adoption of Jesus and the relationship among the members of the

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<sup>64</sup> Karl Barth, “Freedom in Fellowship,” in *The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. III part 4 of *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 300.

Trinity. From Barth's analogies of Jesus' adoption by God, he lays a foundation for Christian ethicists who look to an adoptee's ability to assimilate to legitimize human adoption.

While Barth's theology leads to a new perception of parenthood and what relationships are based on, his theoretical suggestions on the relationships between parent and child are not applicable to every family. In *The Doctrine of Creation*, Barth writes that children owe their existence to their parents, and they cannot annul that relationship or replace it with another. Likewise, neither can a parent "renounce it [their child], nor change the fact that it exists...they are now responsible for its existence."<sup>65</sup> As a condition of the parent-child relationship, each party has an obligation to the other. For children, it is obedience to their parents, and for the parents, in what he terms their "parental responsibility," it is their duty as God's divine ambassadors, or symbols of God's fatherhood,<sup>66</sup> to raise their children to know and encounter Jesus.<sup>67</sup> Conversely, children also have a responsibility to their parents, and Barth states:

The second point which we must make in this respect is that if a man really cannot rid himself of the impression that his parents have failed in their duty and become in some way a downright offence, that that is certainly a very serious difficulty and trial but hardly one which necessarily leads to catastrophe...They [the child] must not waste too much time in bemoaning their fate and in subtly considering what the honoring of parents can possibly mean in this case. The answer is plain and immediate. They must see to it that they for their part make good that which in the behavior of their parents they rightly or wrongly regard as less good. They must see to it that in so doing they remember their place and preserve their humility. And they must also see to it that, if their human parents really fail, their heavenly Father becomes all the greater dearer and more authoritative. This will give them plenty to do, however unfortunate their position."<sup>68</sup>

Upon first glance, this doctrine seems to exhibit a laudable example of filial piety; however, Barth elaborates that no matter what their "parent's flaws" may be, children are in no

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<sup>65</sup> Barth, *CD III/4*, 241.

<sup>66</sup> While Barth only refers to God's fatherhood, God also carries the traits of the perfect mother, and without the two together, our already-limited understanding of God's parenthood would be more incomplete.

<sup>67</sup> Barth, *CD III/4*, 256.

<sup>68</sup> Barth, *CD III/4*, 256-257.

way “authorised to make a judgment upon them [their parents] which has the effect of...releasing them from their obedience to their parents.”<sup>69</sup> Not providing any situational examples of what constitutes a “parent’s flaws,” it is unclear what circumstances constitute a “parent’s flaws” and should be resolved through termination of their parenthood. Rather than refining his message the premises of his message, Barth redirects attention toward the spiritual lesson children may learn from their parent’s failures.

Within the sections explored above, Barth initially seems to argue that a child is partially responsible for ensuring their relationship with their parents is harmonious, but these early assumptions are proven wrong in his concession for adoption<sup>70</sup> by childless couples and singles. Writing that there may be “young persons in their locality whose physical parents may be dead, or for some reason do not fulfil their duty,” Barth’s view on who is eligible to adopt positions itself in stark contrast to Aquinas, who does not believe that those who are incapable of procreation should adopt.<sup>71</sup> By loosening restrictions for adoptive parents, Barth demonstrates his understanding of adoption as a relationship undergone for children who need parents, not for parents who need children. Barth’s new proposition of who is primary subject in adoption highlights a positive development in how the Western Christian tradition has progressively redefined adoption. When adoptive parents are seen as the primary subjects, as the ones whose interest’s adoption serves, adoption is not about extending love to those who have lost love, but about commodifying the ways children may fulfill the economic, emotional, and spiritual needs of adults. For adoption to serve the needs of parents, a child must be fully assimilated to its adoptive family, maintaining a personality, interests, and even a faith that is compatible with

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<sup>69</sup> Barth, *CD III/4*, 256.

<sup>70</sup> While Barth alludes to adoption in his writing, he does not ever name “adoption” itself in his writing. Instead, he refers to people within the local church who may be called to “help” or “care for” persons in their locality whose biological parents are not alive and unable to meet their needs.

<sup>71</sup> Barth, *CD III/4*, 268.

their adoptive family's lifestyle. Such aspirations on the part of adoptive parents can come at the expense of an adoptee's well-being, as they recognize discrepancies between their own lived experiences of parent-child relationships and that of biological relationships. Yet, adoptive relationships that contain some Barthian influence are encouraged to disregard these discrepancies in favor of the spiritual perspective of parent-child relationships that can be found in Matthew 12:46-50.

### *Barthian and Thomistic formulations of adoption*

In contrast to Aquinas, the purpose of adoption for Barth is to allow potential parents to fulfill their chosen parental responsibility. Even though they are not parents by a physical sense, they can bring themselves and other children to know God. As Gary Warren Deddo affirms in his doctoral dissertation analyzing Barth's doctrine on the parent-child relationship from a Trinitarian perspective, for Barth, a parent is not something you are, but something you become once you engage in the action of having a "certain kind of relationship with a child."<sup>72</sup> Despite the flaws of Barth's language and disconnect between theory and its practical application, he accomplishes what Aquinas does not: he bases the relationship between parents and children in the action of parenthood, and not in a physical commonality stemming from one's womb of origin. Both Stephen Post (in his article "Adoption Theologically Considered") and Deddo are quick to affirm Barth's position on the parental relationship, although they also incorporate a problematic Trinitarian perspective. Nevertheless, each of them clarifies what Barth or the other omits. Post and Deddo agree that according to Barth, parenthood may be interrupted by God's "extraordinary claims and constraints" because it is in the child's best interests to set aside their parental relationship, and the "mission of parenting" may be completed by adults other than

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<sup>72</sup> Deddo, "Karl Barth's Special Ethics," 300.

biological parents.<sup>73</sup> This means that how children are parented is more important than procreation and natural origin itself.

The major difference between the Post and Deddo's articles is that Deddo addresses the trauma and loss that forms part of the experience of adoption. Of all the authors referenced in this paper, Deddo is the only one to offer as little as one sentence in reference to the trauma of children who are adopted. In his discussion of the differentiation between adopted and "natural" children, Deddo says that, "the biological and genetic reminder of this truth embodied in their natural parents will be absent for them. This *is* a loss. The relationship is broken off and the continuity of the witness to God's faithfulness is also broken."<sup>74</sup> When comparing the experiences and witness adopted children and children raised by their biological parents, the difference, explains Deddo, is not in the value of whether or not a child is raised by their biological parents, one being more "natural" than the other, or one having a different reality of relationship to Christ, but in the experiences of the two groups, specifically, the loss adoptees experience.

Yet, despite the progression of Christian ethics of adoption found in Barth's formulation of adoption ethics, Barth's emphasis on the spiritual aspects of adoption is disconnected from the economic aspects of adoption. Adoption is characterized as a spiritual relationship that also holds an economic reality, but in contrast to Aquinas, Barth's ethics revolve around the spiritual aspect of relationships, asserting that it is enough for adoptive relationships to be validated on the grounds that adoption is akin to our relationship with God. Connecting the prominence Barth places on the spirituality of relationships with his ethics on adoption, while Barth's claims are more reflective of God's love and compassion than Aquinas' adoption ethics, they still overlook

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<sup>73</sup> Stephen Post, "Adoption Theologically Considered," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 1 (1997): 149, 157, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40018072>.

<sup>74</sup> Deddo, "Karl Barth's Special Ethics," 302.



a vital component of adoption. they do not offer adoptees a way to celebrate their identities and live into their full potential.

Overall, in comparison to Aquinas, Barth grasps an understanding of adoption that Aquinas does not, namely that it should not be centered solely around adoptive parents and that parent-child relationships are grounded in spiritual connections, not a shared physical or biological nature. Barth and Aquinas' varying beliefs on what the foundation of the parent-child relationship informs the workings of their adoption theology. Viewing the relationship as one of "natural" birth or a legal process, Aquinas' conception of adoption is shaped by logic and European canon law. Distinguishing legal family relationships from spiritual family relationships, Aquinas' definition of a family is marked by the physical responsibility of the parents to care for the bodily needs of their children.<sup>75</sup> Then within the category of legal family relationships, natural generation is distinguished from legal generation by a human being who by birthright, are entitled to inherit their parent's goods compared with adoptees, who have a legal right to their parent's inheritance.<sup>76</sup> In theory, separating adoptive relationships from biological ones by the children's right to an inheritance, but in practice, it may lead to the second-class treatment of adoptive relationships. Adoption may be characterized as an economic affair only, lacking in the love and spiritual connections deemed more inherent in biological relationships.

### **Themes concerning adoption in the Western tradition**

Having tracked the role of adoption in the Bible and in the Western Christian tradition, several themes concerning the Christian tradition's justification for adoption emerge. The arguments found in the biblical passages and the ethics of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth fall under at

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<sup>75</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 42.2.3.

<sup>76</sup> Robertson, "A Thomistic Analysis," 688-689.

least one of four rationales: (1) appeals to shared humanity, (2) appeals to shared faith, (3) God's adoption of Jesus and humanity, and (4) appeals to God's universal love.

Each of these themes help cultivate a community identity—a necessary task for the early Jewish-Christian church facing Roman persecution and working towards longevity. But when applied to the question of adoption, appeals to a shared essence and the search for a commonality endorse a homogenous approach to humanity in which our similarities are uplifted more than our differences and the ways our diverse experiences have uniquely shaped our persons and worldviews. Theological validations for adoption should not rely on essentialist arguments that connect humans through the most basic, fundamental trait of humans: that we are human and have a common origin. When we attempt to legitimize adoptive relationships by placing emphasis on the ways in which our humanity automatically makes us a member of God's one happy family, we are prone to fail to recognize the complexity of adoption, human beings in general, and we deny ourselves the opportunity to grow from new experiences of relationships in society.

Pro-adoption arguments that rely on Trinitarian explanations of God's adoption of humanity and Jesus prove problematic as well. Trinitarian analyses of adoption use the relationships of the Trinity to think about adoptive relationships, which also leads scholars to legitimize adoption because of its similarities to the relationship of the Trinity and God's adoption of humanity.<sup>77</sup> Robertson's "A Thomistic Analysis of Embryo Adoption" draws parallels between human and divine adoption by explaining how the Trinity is analogous to natural generation and the relationship between humans of the same nature and origin, and how

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<sup>77</sup> Charles D. Robertson, "A Thomistic Analysis of Embryo Adoption," *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 14 no.4 (2014): 689, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=rfh&AN=ATLAn3777229&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

legal generation is analogous to divine adoption and God's adoption of humans, who are not equal with God.<sup>78</sup> Yet, when advocating for adoption's validity, drawing from the example of God's love for humanity should not be seen as the reason adoption leads to fully loving parent-child relationships, but rather, as supporting evidence. Trinitarian analyses such as this, in which the adoptive relationship is made comparable to the Trinity and God's relationship to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, romanticize adoption as an action of saviorism and naïve hope.

When conducting a Trinitarian analysis of human adoption, it is vital to recognize the distinction between human adoption and adoption by God. Whereas adoption by God is a desirable adoption that allows imperfect humans to attain the love of the perfect parent, human adoption involves the transfer of a child from one experience of broken and imperfect relationships to another relationship, a relationship where they will inevitably experience disappointment and the flaws that all human parents inflict on their children. Through Jesus, God has offered grace and salvation to all of humanity, but adoptive parents are not the saviors of their adopted children. The white saviorism that many adoptees, especially international and transracial adoptees, witness from their parents improperly gives credit to adoptive parents for their children's acquisition of an earthly family and only serve to build the human ego, not exemplify God's love.

Lastly, ontological reasonings are just as exclusive, as seen in Robertson's Thomistic study of the difference between natural and legal generation. In a painfully exclusive statement, Robertson states his belief that "the child by natural generation is the subject of a real relation to his parents; the adopted child is the subject of a relation of reason to his adopted parents."<sup>79</sup>

While Robertson's intention is to uplift adoption by comparing the adoptive relationship with

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<sup>78</sup> Robertson, "A Thomistic Analysis," 689.

<sup>79</sup> Robertson, "A Thomistic Analysis," 690.

humanity's relationship with God, which also exists as a relation of reason, this statement degrades adoption through its use of the word "real," and its suggestion that adoption is analogous to our relationship with God conveys the message that adopted children will always be disconnected from their adopted parent's nature because they were not created from their DNA. Likewise, Aquinas' use of the word "natural" and the other authors' use of "real" to describe biological relationships are insensitive towards adoptees since these words imply an undertone of falseness and unnaturalness in adoptive relationships. While Barth, Aquinas, and the other voices mentioned in this essay all mean to validate the value of adoption, each of them contradict their respective positions by devaluing adoptive relationships through their semantics and quest for a homogenous essence that exists in biological and adoptive relationships.

Thus, this is where Neo-Confucianism is able to aid Western Christianity's current conceptions of adoption. Coming from a radically different system of metaphysics and being largely uninfluenced by Western philosophical traditions, Neo-Confucianism offers an innovative method for reframing how humans relate to each other for the purposes of undoing the hierarchy between biological and adoptive relationships.

#### NEO-CONFUCIANISM AS THE BASIS FOR ADOPTION ETHICS

Initially, it may seem odd to pivot towards a set of teachings whose parent, Confucianism, was one of the primary motivators that helped China's patriarchal systems, culture of female infanticide, and adoption proliferate. Within Chinese culture, gender and economics govern relationships and the practice of adoption to a greater extent than it has in the West. As I recognize the actuality of adoption practices, I do so for the purposes of acknowledging the discrepancies that exist between theory and practice in Chinese society. However, my focus

remains on the theoretical frameworks Neo-Confucianism has to offer Christianity. The theory that undergirds Christian ethics of adoption influences our praxis, and Neo-Confucianism has never existed on its own within Chinese society. As a religiously pluralistic culture, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism are concurrently adhered to and practiced by Chinese people. The lack of a purely Neo-Confucian presence in society makes retrieving its ethical framework worthwhile because there is flexibility for its application. In my examination of Neo-Confucian ethics, I will start by contextualizing adoption within Chinese culture. Then, I will dive further into the details of Neo-Confucianism and Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi*.

### **Adoption in Chinese culture**

Kay Johnson, in her article "Politics of International Adoption,"<sup>80</sup> recognizes Confucianism's emphasis on bloodlines and preference for sons, as do Anne Thurston<sup>81</sup> and Xinran.<sup>82</sup> Adoption in Chinese culture is strongly rooted in patriarchal belief systems, including Confucianism and its concept of filial piety. Chinese culture evolved to make it a social and economic necessity for families to have sons. Having sons ensured that families could receive land, food rations, and acceptance within the community.<sup>83</sup> Though coming from a Western perspective, Johnson's article also perceives that while Confucianism helped create the gender disparity within Chinese adoption trends, the actual practice of adoption in Chinese society has also been influenced by poverty and the role of gender in alleviating a family's financial woes.

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<sup>80</sup> Kay Johnson, "Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China Special Issue on Nonbiological Parenting - Papers of General Interest," *Law & Society Review* 36, no. 2 (2002): 381.

<sup>81</sup> Anne F. Thurston, "In a Chinese Orphanage," *The Atlantic*, April 1, 1996, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/04/in-a-chinese-orphanage/376563/>.

<sup>82</sup> Xinran, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, trans. Nicky Harman (New York, NY: Scribner, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Xinran, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, 123.

Xinran, a former Chinese radio journalist, comments that abandoning female babies has been common in Eastern farming cultures for centuries.<sup>84</sup> In her experiences interviewing and interacting with thousands of Chinese women, Xinran has a unique position as an “inside source” who has been able to uncover local testimonies of adoption and place these narratives within the larger context of Chinese history and philosophy.

As the birthplace of Confucianism, patriarchal family values in Chinese culture became the “central organizing principle of kinship and community.”<sup>85</sup> In chapter two of the first book of the *Analects*, Confucius immediately establishes the importance of filial piety. He writes, “Filial piety and fraternal submission! –are they not the root of all benevolent actions?”<sup>86</sup> In addition to carrying on a family name, male children in the villages were also the sole “source of the family property and the creators of its wealth.”<sup>87</sup> Families could only afford to have so many female children. Therefore, the importance of every family having a male heir became a core concept in Chinese social and economic structures.

Yet, adoption practices in Chinese culture clashed with Confucian ideologies since people often adopted outside of their bloodlines.<sup>88</sup> Traditional Confucian ideology discouraged adopting outside of one’s bloodline and surname for the purposes of ancestral veneration. Researching the adoption practices of Haishan, Taiwan (now part of Taipei City) from 1845-1945, Arthur Wolf utilized household registries, local government and Western missionary reports, and local interviews to uncover the commonality of adoption from outside of bloodlines.

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<sup>84</sup> Xinran, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, xix.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption,” 381.

<sup>86</sup> Confucius, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2012), <https://hdl.handle.net/eu1.proxy.openathens.net/2027/heh.09336>. EPUB, 139.

<sup>87</sup> Xinran, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, xx.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption,” 383.

In one report from Fujian, the province from which many Taiwanese emigrated, Wolf discovered that “the common people often buy girls of a different surname.”<sup>89</sup>

Another form of adoption cited by Johnson and Wolf is that of *minglizi*, meaning “mulberry insect children.”<sup>90</sup> The alias is based on a phrase from Confucianism’s *Book of Songs*, and it refers to the belief that wasps take the children of mulberry insects and raise them as their own wasp children, transforming the mulberry insects into young wasps.<sup>91</sup> When applied to adopted children, the *minglizi* metaphor conveys the idea that a child may become the child of someone other than its biological parents.<sup>92</sup>

Still, the concept of *minglizi* does not wholly rebuke Confucian ideology; rather, it agrees with Confucianism’s belief that “upbringing and cultivation” are the “key to character [which] provides further support for ties built on nurture and social relationships rather than on biology and heredity.”<sup>93</sup> Additionally, children adopted as *minglingzi* were still not considered full family members even though they were inheritors. Of the nine definitions of adoption Ann Waltner articulates in her book, *Getting an Heir*, none of them truly rebuke Confucianism’s emphasis on bloodlines because they are all oriented towards the purpose of getting an heir.<sup>94</sup> This trend parallels that of the Western legal tradition. Waltner distinguishes between the functions of adoption and fostering in China as follows: the purpose of adoption is to get an heir, and the purpose of fostering is to care for an abandoned child.<sup>95</sup> But despite its similarities to adoption in

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<sup>89</sup> Arthur P. Wolf and Chieh-shan Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China, 1845-1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 12.

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption,” 383.

<sup>91</sup> Ann Waltner, *Getting an Heir* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv9zcyj6>, 14.

<sup>92</sup> Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption,” 383.

<sup>93</sup> Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption,” 384.

<sup>94</sup> Waltner, *Getting an Heir*, 12-14.

<sup>95</sup> Waltner, *Getting an Heir*, 15.

the Western tradition, Chinese culture regarding adoption distinguishes itself from Western traditions in the following way:

The prominence given to notions of blood affinity in early modern Europe has no Chinese counterpart. The twelfth century expert on canon law Gratian (Decretal LVI) argued that the horror with which God viewed the children of adulterous unions was fundamentally the fear that they would themselves grow up to be adulterers. The sins of the fathers were inherited by the children. In the Chinese moral landscape, though retribution was sure, the children did not inherit the failings of their fathers. Where habit was equal to instinct, and early childhood education could supplant nature, we hear no such arguments against caring for children of uncertain parentage. The arguments and the fears lie on other grounds.<sup>96</sup>

In this passage, the Christian tradition and Western legal traditions are described as being inextricably intertwined with adoption ethics and beliefs concerning the relationship between biology and one's nature. Waltner also refers to Chinese thought to show a deemphasis on biological ties in Chinese families. In popular Chinese thinking, blood does not determine one's character, but one's upbringing and life influences.<sup>97</sup> According to Kwok Pui-lan, Asian philosophical traditions ground justice in compassion for all living things.<sup>98</sup> Amidst the ambiguity of Chinese adoption practices, I turn to the ideology of Zhang Zai, a Neo-Confucian scholar born in 1020 C.E., to redefine what Chinese practices are unable to do. As a system almost entirely ethical in nature and not oriented towards the worship of a god, but rather, perfecting this life via relations, Neo-Confucianism contains concepts that upon further exploration, may help us reconceptualize the value of adoptive relationships.

## **Introduction to Neo-Confucianism and Zhang Zai**

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<sup>96</sup> Waltner, *Getting an Heir*, 34.

<sup>97</sup> Waltner, *Getting an Heir*, 20.

<sup>98</sup> Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist*, 77-78.



Neo-Confucianism itself is divided into various subgroups of schools. One of these subgroups belongs to the category *daoxue* (道學), or “learning of the Way.” The *daoxue* strain of Neo-Confucianism focuses on the moral Way, not just literary learning and accomplishment.<sup>99</sup> This is comparable to Western discussions on theory and practice. Within *daoxue*, Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald have classified three schools of Neo-Confucian philosophy: *lixue* (理學), *xinxue* (心學), and *guanxue* (關學).<sup>100</sup> *Lixue* emphasizes the pattern learning and *li*, *xinxue* heart-mind learning, and *guanxue* that of the *qi* that comprises the basic anatomy of the world and its inhabitants.<sup>101</sup> Zhang Zai falls into this third school of thought, *guanxue*.

Within Neo-Confucianism, Zhang Zai’s philosophy has largely been subsumed into the *lixue* philosophy found in the Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi’s school.<sup>102</sup> Their school of thought placed *li* as the central notion, though, and because Zhang Zai placed *qi* at the center of philosophy, he was “considered as someone who did not quite understand the way, that is, the notion of *li* properly.”<sup>103</sup> Upon his death, the significance of Zhang Zai’s reflections on *qi* was undermined by the *lixue* school he was associated with. Zhu Xi, a prominent *lixue* Neo-Confucian scholar, said about Zhang Zai:

這道理本平正，清也有是理，濁也有是理，虛也有是理，實也有是理，皆此理之所為也。他說這一邊有，那一邊無

The *li* of the way is originally distributed evenly. In the clear there is *li* and in the turbid there is *li*. There is *li* in the empty and in the full. All are affected by *li*. Zhang Zai only has one side but not the other.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*, 2-3.

<sup>102</sup> Jung-Yeup Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy of Qi: A Practical Understanding* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2015), 8.

<sup>103</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy*, 6.

<sup>104</sup> Zhuzi yulei (Dialogues of Zhu Xi), 99:41.

Other philosophers defend Zhang Zai and his teachings, but the purpose of noting this history is to differentiate Zhang Zai from the *lixue* school of thought he has often been associated with. I follow Jung-Yeup Kim in advocating for the separation of Zhang Zai from the *lixue* school of thought.

Zhang Zai's development of the concept of *qi* in combination with his other works is complex and innovative. In their book *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*, Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald propose that Zhang Zai is the reason *qi* attained such prominence in Neo-Confucianism.<sup>105</sup> Zhang's investigation of *qi* and its relationship to the world and the right way of living is one of the most thorough analyses of *qi* that shows how an ethics of adoption can recognize the economic aspect and spirituality of adoptive relationships.

### **Zhang Zai's Philosophy of *Qi***

Jung-Yeup Kim's interpretation of Zhang Zai's philosophy is unique because it is adamant about ensuring both the plurality and the unity of *qi*. Many contemporary scholars, including Stephen Angle, Justin Tiwald, and Wing-Tsit Chan interpret Zhang Zai's concept of *qi* as a monist being: while *qi* is expressed in myriad ways, everything may be reduced to the one singular element of *qi*. Angle and Tiwald suggest that everything boils down to *qi*, just as everything is reduced to pattern and *li* in the *lixue* school of thought.<sup>106</sup> Chan believes that a fundamental idea in Zhang Zai's message is that "the universe is one but its manifestations are many."<sup>107</sup> In contrast, Kim interprets Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi* as an "organic unity of correlative polarities."<sup>108</sup> Simply put, in Zhang Zai's understanding of *qi*, everything naturally unites through differences and

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<sup>105</sup> Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*, 33.

<sup>106</sup> Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*, 77.

<sup>107</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, "Chang Tsai's Philosophy of Material Force," in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 498.

<sup>108</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy*, 34.

through the way polarities interact with each other.<sup>109</sup> Unity does not precede differences or come through similarities. Without polar differences, there is no unity, and Zhang Zai is not on a quest to discover one singular element that all things ultimately are ontologically.<sup>110</sup> Zhang is not a metaphysical monist.

Within Chinese culture and cosmology, Zhang's understanding of *qi* aligns with the tradition of complementary binomials. Within Chinese cosmology, binary oppositions are a central facet of the cosmology, but they are treated as simultaneously complementary. This paradoxical relationship is evident in the Chinese vocabulary, in words such as *tiandi* (天地). *Tian* (天), meaning "heavens" and "sky" is contrasted with *di* (地), "earth," to create the word *tiandi*, "the world." By understanding Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi* as a continuation of traditional Chinese cosmology, *qi* may be understood as a correlative cosmology in which differences create unity without being reduced to a singular essence.<sup>111</sup> Applied to relationships, relationships cannot be defined through one notion either, whether they are biological or adoptive, products of economy or love. The standard used to measure the validity of one relationship, such as genealogy and genetics, cannot be used to measure the validity of other relationships or upheld as the paradigm of all relationships, with relationships bearing other characteristics deemed impure and inferior.

This ethical elaboration of Zhang Zai's philosophy is not an outside imposition; Zhang Zai's himself discussed the importance of affirming different expressions of our relationships with others in his "Western Inscription," the *Ximing* (西銘). Originally written as a chapter in his more well-known book, *Correcting Ignorance*, or *Zhengmeng* (正蒙), Zhang Zai's writing

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<sup>109</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy*, 34.

<sup>110</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy*, 34.

<sup>111</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy*, 35.

directly addresses ethical questions. According to Kim, the purpose of Zhang's essay is to transform opinionated, predetermined, obstinate, and egoistic individuals by intermingling with others.<sup>112</sup> This goal is achieved by framing the world as a family. The essay opens with:

Heaven is my father, and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.<sup>113</sup>

Writing on the common origin of all creation and their shared natures, Zhang's essay forms what Wing-Tsit Chan declares the "basis of Neo-Confucian ethics" as it "deals with the substance of humanity."<sup>114</sup> From the opening line, Zhang presents the argument that all people "are my brothers and sisters."<sup>115</sup> United by *qi*, Zhang believes that we serve the universal parents of heaven and earth through the moral activity of loving others as we love our parents and pursue *ren* (仁), or humanity.<sup>116</sup> Living in the harmonious relationships described in the Western Inscription is made possible by *qi*, which flows through all things and balances out the ever-changing state of reality through the balance of *yin* and *yang*. For adoption ethics, this means that a Christian understanding of adoption should be and has the potential to be holistic, cognizant and accepting of the ways adoption encompasses both spiritual and earthly natures.

In Jung-Yeup Kim's analysis of the "Western Inscription," he explicitly notes the anti-biological roots of Zhang Zai's essay. He writes:

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<sup>112</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy*, 51-52.

<sup>113</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, "Chang Tsai's Philosophy of Material Force," in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 497.

<sup>114</sup> Chan, "Chang Tsai's Philosophy," 498.

<sup>115</sup> Chan, "Chang Tsai's Philosophy," 497.

<sup>116</sup> Yu-lan Fung and Derek Bodde, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1948), 279-280.279-280.

It can be seen here that for Zhang Zai the family is not defined as a set of biological ties that may restrict and limit the process of expansion of our heart-minds. Rather, the family is understood as a place in which the capacity for resonance exists and has been realized to the maximum. That is, it is a place where there is utmost communication, cooperation, and mutual flourishing. It is a state where our heart-minds have obtained the greatest range and intensity of interpenetration and harmonization with one another, and thus is a most affectively vital environment. Thus, for him, the notion of family becomes a philosophical ideal and an aesthetic source.<sup>117</sup>

For Zhang Zai, we should not set limits on who is included in our family circles. Defining the family as those with whom we resonate to the maximum, Zhang frees our *qi* to form “productive and vital relationships” with others.<sup>118</sup> We are also free to define who constitutes our family, without biological ties assuming a superior position.

From the binomial nature of Chinese cosmology and the “Western Inscription,” Daniel Gardner asserts that for Zhang, the entire universe is bound together by its shared *qi* and all people are interrelated.<sup>119</sup> Another way to phrase Zhang Zai’s *qi* is as the “vital energy” common to all energy and matter and realms in the world.<sup>120</sup> This means that the structure, order, and value of things in the world are all made up of *qi*, this vital energy, and *qi* is in a constant state of change as it takes on different forms. Even Gardner’s apparently substance monist interpretation, which labels the relational ethics of the “Western Inscription” as “quasi-biological” relationships, saying “man spontaneously feels compassion toward others” because humankind is “simply one big family,” is compatible with Zhang’s philosophy of *qi* as Kim has analyzed it. Once the pluralistic nature of *qi* is recognized, it is possible to return to the ways things are similar and connected. By addressing the correlative polarities of *qi* first, the argument that humankind is

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<sup>117</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy*, 52.

<sup>118</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy*, 47-48.

<sup>119</sup> Daniel K Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73-74.

<sup>120</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy*, 1.

“simply one big family” is no longer predicated on our common nature, but on the ways our *qi* resonates with other living beings.<sup>121</sup> Yet, while *qi* may be seen as a revision of an appeal to a shared essence or a shared humanity, the distinction to be made is that *qi*, unlike most Christian arguments, is itself characterized by polarities. One of the forms that Jung-Yeup Kim, a contemporary scholar of Neo-Confucianism, describes *qi* as being is “at once one and many.”<sup>122</sup> With this explanation of *qi*, Zhang uses differences—not similarities—to connect the many entities *qi* comprises.<sup>123</sup>

### **Zhang Zai’s philosophy of *qi* applied to Western perspectives of adoption**

Even outside of the theological and philosophical realm, the yearning for adoption ethics where differences can be expressed and honored can be found in conversations by adoptive parents and adoptees. Karin Evan’s book, *The Lost Daughters of China*, is a memoir that weaves her personal narrative as a Chinese adoptive parent with her pursuit to learn about the socio-historical background of Chinese adoptions and her ponderings on the development of Chinese adoptees’ cultural development.<sup>124</sup> As Evans speculates on her daughter’s future relationship to her Chinese heritage, she struggles with the balance between emphasizing her adopted child’s differences or her similarities. She writes:

Children everywhere experience a great desire to fit into the world around them. If parents of children adopted from China push the China connection too hard, some fear they may run the risk of emphasizing differences rather than similarities, of suggesting to their daughters that they somehow stand outside the family and community around them, or that they belong somewhere else. Ignoring the links to their homeland, on the other

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<sup>121</sup> Gardner, *Confucianism*, 74.

<sup>122</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy of Qi*, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy of Qi*, x.

<sup>124</sup> Evans, *The Lost Daughters*.

hand, and parents may deny their children the resources they'll need to feel good about themselves and to explore their origins.<sup>125</sup>

The tension Evans mentions here is not a rebuttal to Zhang Zai's concept of *qi* as it reframes adoption ethics because it is concentrated on the value attributed to what it means to be different and similar. What Evans is concerned with are not differences in and of themselves, but the meaning attributed to differences, which says families are distinguished from other families by physical or ideological differences. Thus, in order to release the tension Evans describes, Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi* offers a foundation for reconceptualizing how humans relate to each other without descending into generic claims about the shared human spirit.

The radical difference in Zhang Zai's pluralistic approach to *qi* and a relational ethics can be seen when it is compared to Kim's interpretation of Aristotelian ethics. According to Kim, Aristotle's writings on the ethics of relationships and the meaning of similarities contrast with Zhang Zai's conceptualization of *qi*. Unlike in Aristotle's ethics, there is an absence of the notion of homogeneity in Zhang Zai's understanding of *qi*. Aristotle's development of homogeneity and differences asserts that things differ from others in genus only, and things that differ in genus are unable to be compared because they are too different.<sup>126</sup> Our ability to compare two things is dependent on whether the things we are comparing have a shared trait. For example, man and woman are understood as oppositional terms, but they have something in common. Though man and woman are different species, they both belong to the genus of humans. Similarly, both biological and adoptive relationships are legitimized in Western societies and in Christianity, and they are both a form of parent-child relationships. However, biological relationships have been elevated as superior to adoptive ones, similar to how the role and power of men have relegated to

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<sup>125</sup> Evans, *The Lost Daughters*, 185.

<sup>126</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy of Qi*, 75.

women the roles of the weaker sex. In this line of reasoning, when commonality is required for comparison, differences are used to separate one species from the other. Comparison through differentiation does not automatically imply a hierarchical relationship in general, but in comparisons between adoptive and biological relationships, a hierarchy has been established.

In contrast, Zhang Zai believes that things do not have to be related to the same genus or similarly connected in order to relate to each other as different and similar.<sup>127</sup> *Yin* and *yang* provide one example of this relationship. *Yin* and *yang* are the differentiation of *qi* into two complementary, intertwined, but also separate types of energy responsible for creating the heavens and earth and for regulating *qi* in the body.<sup>128</sup> *Qi*'s embrace of differences through equalizing terms is partly made possible by its connection to *yin* and *yang*. As two expressions of *qi*, *yinyang* are seen as complementary opposites of each other. *Yin* makes up the part of things that are dark, feminine, and earthly, while *yang* is light, masculine, and heavenly.<sup>129</sup> But together, they imply a variety of relationships, such as contradiction and opposition (*maodun* 矛盾), interdependence (*xiangyi* 相依), and change and transformation (*zhuanhua* 轉化), among others.<sup>130</sup> Using our differences to unite us without a shared identity, *qi* does not validate adoptive relationships by advocating for a common faith or identity family members should share, but by proclaiming that “harmony (*he*) requires opposites (*yinyang*).”<sup>131</sup> While Aquinas and Barth conceive adoption primarily around either a material or spiritual dimension, Zhang's *qi* brings together a more balanced and holistic reality that accounts for both the material and spiritual, the earthly and heavenly.

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<sup>127</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy of Qi*, 76.

<sup>128</sup> Angle and Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism*, 33.

<sup>129</sup> Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist*, 70.

<sup>130</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy of Qi*, 35.

<sup>131</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy of Qi*, 69.



## ZHANG ZAI' S CONCEPT OF *QI* WITH CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF ADOPTION

By grounding human relationships in *qi*, in contrast, Zhang Zai opens up the possibility for an ethics of adoption to reimagine what connects a group of biologically unrelated people as a family. For Zhang, the answer does not lie solely in law or a spiritual responsibility, but in our shared *qi*. Even though Neo-Confucian thought does not directly engage with the topic of adoption, *qi* still offers instructions on how to properly order social relationships. Zhang's philosophy of *qi*, with the aid of *yin* and *yang*, reveals a cosmological explanation for social relationships that transcends barriers of culture and identity without requiring assimilation or the loss of an identity.

Connecting Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi* with a Christian ethics of adoption, Zhang's work allows us to reimagine how humans relate to each other as an individual, as a collective, and as members of a family. Zhang suggests in the "Western Inscription" that there is inherent value in being in familial relationship with those who are different than us. No matter one's country of birth, upbringing, blood lineage, or other points of difference, resonating with others who are different than us and deconstructing the idea that similarity is the crux of family relationships. Adoptive relationships should not seek to overlook differences, minimizing their obvious reality, in favor of searching for a shared biological or personality trait that "makes" one part of a family.

For Christian audiences, the call for an inclusive family is not a new one. A significant proportion of Jesus' ministry on earth was focused on social justice, showing God's love and mercy to those whom society rejected. Yet, the Christian tradition and Scripture have not equipped Christians with the theoretical foundation and biblical interpretations needed to imagine how adoption may be initiated out of pure love for humanity, and not out of a desire for

an heir, as a backup plan to failed procreation, or as an item on a bucket list Christian disciples feel called by God to fulfill. Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi* calls us Christians to rethink our own assumptions about what brings a family together.

Neo-Confucianism's concept of *qi*, by removing the hierarchy and emphasis on sameness that elevates biological relationships, adoptive relationships are able to be equally valued for their own ontological being. The goal for Christian ethicists and theologians engaged with the ethical questions of adoption is to replace the stigma of adoptive relationships underlying Christian ethics of adoption with an inclusive and accepting love for all. The result is a new, welcoming expression of adoptees and adoptive families in society. In the next sections, I will further demonstrate how Zhang Zai's conception of *qi* can revitalize Christian ethics of adoption to address the needs of adoptees today, using the example of private, Christian adoption agencies to illustrate the ethical issues at hand.

### **Conceptions of adoption in practice**

The first international adoption agency established in the United States is Holt International Children's Services. Founded in 1956 by Harry and Bertha Holt, their journey began when they adopted eight Korean war orphans and brought them to the United States.<sup>132</sup> Since then, Holt International has been one of the leading international adoption agencies in the United States, among other major adoption agencies, including CCAI Adoption Services. One of the differences between CCAI and Holt is that Holt is a Christian-affiliated nonprofit. While the founders of both adoption agencies are Christian, Holt's mission is explicitly connected to a defined Christian mission. Their mission statement states that Holt is a "Christian organization

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<sup>132</sup> Richard Tessler, Mia Tuan, and Jiannbin Lee Shiao, "The Many Faces of International Adoption," *Contexts* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504211427866>.

committed to expressing God's compassion for children."<sup>133</sup> Considering the motivations of Holt's founders and its identification with a Christian mission, the problem with adoption agencies with Christian undercurrents becomes clear. Laybourn states that "through media framing, first-hand accounts from Christian missionaries to church congregations, and the Hols, Korean adoption became linked to Christian ideals of helping the fatherless."<sup>134</sup> Harry Holt himself is quoted as believing that he was fulfilling a "mission from God."<sup>135</sup> From discussions with international adoptees, I have observed that the ideals held by Holt's founders still influence the way many private adoption agencies teach adoptive parents about adoption. These ideals are ultimately linked back to Christianity because of how the Holt's first crafted the narrative of Korean adoptions.

It may initially appear as if Neo-Confucianism merely reiterates messages that Christian ethics already contains within itself. In the Bible, Jesus does embrace a broad definition of family that moves beyond blood lineage. Yet, as previously mentioned, the theoretical groundwork that the principles of Christian ethics are rooted in can misguide Christians. As Christian ethics promote a definition of family as relationships not rooted in biological ties, it simultaneously implies that one's family members must be connected by a commonality of if not physical appearance, then in ideology, religion, or at the very least, humanity. The essentialist approach Christian ethics utilizes leads to conflicting understandings on the purpose of adoption and navigating differences in culture between adoptees, adoptive parents, and the general public.

From the adoptee's perspective, especially in transracial and international adoptions, the differences between one's adoptive parent(s) and the adoptee are blaringly obvious. Attempts to minimize the difference between a parent's and child's skin tones and cultural heritages can be

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<sup>133</sup> "About," Holt International, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.holtinternational.org/about/>.

<sup>134</sup> Laybourn, "Being a Transnational Korean Adoptee, Becoming Asian American," 32.

<sup>135</sup> Laybourn, "Being a Transnational Korean Adoptee, Becoming Asian American," 32.

pursued with vigor, leading adoptees to feel as if their differences are considered a disadvantage. Prior to commencement of adoptions from South Korea in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Wendy Laybourn states that “international adoptions were carefully controlled family-making meant to minimize difference through matching children and adoptive parents by physical features, religion, and temperament. The goal was that these adoptions appear ‘as if begotten.’”<sup>136</sup> Following the aftermath of the Korean War, thousands of South Korean children began to be adopted by American parents. As Korean adoptees entered the American landscape, Laybourn observes that adoptions became open to children who are not of the same race as their adoptive parents. However, this progress relied on the American religious consciousness and belief in Korean adoptees’ ability to assimilate.<sup>137</sup> The prevailing ideology in American society continued to downplay adoptees’ differences when possible:

Though Korean children were obviously racially different from their White adoptive parents, mainstream press and adoption agencies portrayed this difference as negligible. Korean children were seen as having a racial flexibility and benign exoticism. The assumption was that Korean children would, and could, assimilate totally into their White families. Social work best practices at the outset of Korean adoption were that no attention be given to transracial adoptees’ racial difference or heritage culture. These transnational transracial adoptees were seen simply as family members, not racially different and not immigrants.<sup>138</sup>

As the first major group of nonwhite adoptees to come to the United States, the assimilationist upbringings of older Korean adoptees help show the gradual development in perceptions of adoption and beliefs on how families are grouped together. But there is still progress to be made, and assimilationist ideologies still run through many adoptive families and agencies today. An article published by Lisa Schencker for the *Los Angeles Times* in 2004 details

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<sup>136</sup> Wendy Marie Laybourn, “Being a Transnational Korean Adoptee, Becoming Asian American,” *Contexts* 17, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218812866>.

<sup>137</sup> Laybourn, “Being a Transnational Korean Adoptee, Becoming Asian American,” 32.

<sup>138</sup> Laybourn, “Being a Transnational Korean Adoptee, Becoming Asian American,” 32.

the growth in adoption communities to embrace adoptees' cultural heritages and backgrounds.<sup>139</sup> While Schencker positively writes that "rather than downplaying their children's differences as was often done in the past, parents are embracing them in hopes that greater understanding will lead to greater acceptance," her article is tellingly titled, "A New Way to Assimilate Adoptees."<sup>140</sup>

Within Christianity, the discrepancies between the pro-adoption beliefs found in the Bible and the beliefs of Christians have pushed many adoptees away from Christianity. Rather than finding a God of love and compassion, many adoptees have been shown a God who cherishes homogeneity and promotes white saviorism, or what Teju Cole calls the "white savior industrial complex."<sup>141</sup> In his article, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," Cole describes the white-savior industrial complex through the context of Western humanitarian aid to Africa. Disturbed by his Western audience's incomprehension of their country's roles in exploiting African countries and their resources, Cole indirectly describes the white-savior industrial complex as the efforts of Western, white groups to do good while satisfying their own emotional needs.<sup>142</sup> In response to catastrophic events in nonwhite countries, Western countries rush to send charity and relief aid workers abroad to meet the immediate need. However, Cole writes that in these circumstances, Western countries only see need; they do not "reason out the need for the need."<sup>143</sup> Meaning, many people in Western countries do not reflect on why many non-Western and nonwhite countries are dependent on Western countries to meet their basic humanitarian and

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<sup>139</sup> Lisa Schencker, "A New Way to Assimilate Adoptees," *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2004, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-nov-14-adna-adopt14-story.html>.

<sup>140</sup> Schencker, "A New Way."

<sup>141</sup> Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

<sup>142</sup> Kristina R. Anderson, Eric Knee, and Rasul Mowatt, "Leisure and the 'White-Savior Industrial Complex,'" *Journal of Leisure Research* 52, no. 5 (October 20, 2021): 531, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2020.1853490>.

<sup>143</sup> Cole, "The White-Savior."

economic needs in the first place. Thus, the white-savior industrial complex becomes “a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage.”<sup>144</sup>

Within academia, conversations and studies on white saviorism, Christianity, and adoption are greatly lacking. White saviorism is no stranger to Christianity, as Christian missionaries and church-affiliated international relief organizations have begun to be reanalyzed through the lens of colonialism and Western imperialism. Applied to adoption, white saviorism is evocative of God’s adoption of humanity, and as seen in the example of Holt International, this message trickles down into private adoption agencies and adoptive parents. In Christian-affiliated adoption agencies and even private agencies who are not officially affiliated, their methodologies and ideologies often reflect Christian principles and ethics. The effects of this are monumental because only private agencies process international adoptions. Over 280,000 international adoptions to the United States have been processed, with the vast majority of adoptees coming from China, followed by Russia, Guatemala, and South Korea.<sup>145</sup>

Current backlash against private adoption agencies is currently concerned with the ability for same-sex couples to adopt, as evidenced by the ACLU’s 2017 lawsuit against Michigan Children’s Services Agency and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>146</sup> The connection between adoption and its effect on adoptees is largely unexplored beyond a few paragraphs. The majority of published articles devoted to exploring adoption and the role of white saviorism and religion come from adoptees themselves, publishing short articles and blogs on websites such as *Rewire*, *Medium*, and *Huffpost*. With the increase in adoptee voices and perspectives in media and publishing, adoption agencies and adoptive parents are coming to

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<sup>144</sup> Cole, “The White-Savior.”

<sup>145</sup> “Adoption Statistics,” Travel.State.Gov, accessed April 5, 2022, [https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt\\_ref/adoption-statistics-esri.html?wcmode=disabled](https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt_ref/adoption-statistics-esri.html?wcmode=disabled).

<sup>146</sup> Travis Weber, “ACLU: Forcing Faith Out of Adoption,” Family Research Council, accessed April 5, 2022, <http://www.frc.org/op-eds/aclu-forcing-faith-out-of-adoption>.

realize there is a discrepancy between the way adoption is framed and discussed within adoption agencies themselves, the church, and the public, and the ways these discussions of adoption are expressed in the lives of adoptees.

In her article published on *Rewire*, Rachel Priest, a Chinese adoptee, writes about the approach adoptive families and adoption agencies utilize to discuss race and transracial identities with their adopted children.<sup>147</sup> Priest cites family therapist, Moses Farrow, to illustrate the problematic ways adoption agencies reinforce the white savior complex in adoptive families, who says, “In that context of saving children, adoptive parents are told, ‘Now they’re yours, raise them as your own.’”<sup>148</sup> The directive to “raise them as your own” is one oft-told to adoptive parents, and it is told with good intentions. It is important that an adopting family treat all of their children fairly, making them fully welcome and equal members of the family. But this treatment should not come at the cost of forced assimilation. For many adoptees, it comes at the loss of their cultural heritage, a struggle to express why they feel less connected to the family tree they created for a school project, and an inability to recognize the beauty of their differences.

While the issues of Western imperialism and white saviorism are far more complex than *qi* alone can solve, within the context of adoption ethics found in Christianity, Zhang Zai’s concept of *qi* provides a new perspective for how we construct family relationships and why adoptive parents validate adoptive relationships. Zhang’s formulation of *qi* encourages the Western Christian church, and subsequently, to discard the assumption that biological relationships are “better” because they connect people who are genetically similar. Likening adoptive relationships to biological relationships and pretending that adoptive relationships are identical to biological ones in all ways reflects assimilationist tendencies, which can

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<sup>147</sup> Rachel Priest, “Transracial Adoptees Are Facing an Identity Reckoning,” *Rewire*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.rewire.org/interracial-adoptees-are-facing-an-identity-reckoning>.

<sup>148</sup> Priest, “Transracial Adoptees Are.”

unintentionally show symptoms of the white-savior complex. Unlike biological relationships, adoptive relationships distinguish between adoptive and birth parents. This is further complicated in closed adoptions where information of the birth parents is concealed and in cases where the birth parents are unknown.

The purpose of *qi* in adoption is to accept differences for what they are, not what they can assimilate to, without sacrificing or cancelling Christianity in the process. While the title from the *Family Research Council* article expresses an irrational fear of separation of church and adoption, “ACLU: Forcing Faith Out of Adoption,” I do not believe the solution is to force private agencies to secularize.<sup>149</sup> Christianity has an intimate connection with adoption, as shown by the very biblical metaphors that are interpreted and applied in problematic ways. However, Christianity has not been able to represent adoption in a manner that respects adoptees’ identities and the differences that make up adoptive relationships.

*Qi*, in its Neo-Confucian context, provides ample opportunity to realize the “great creative potential inherent in this diverse world.”<sup>150</sup> Creativity and our ability to resonate with others is dependent on plurality in the world.<sup>151</sup> Upon discovering the fullness and glorious complexity of this *qi*, we may find what Kim describes as a “fruitful integration amongst our differences” that will “intensify and expand the human experience.”<sup>152</sup> Here, unity does not come in spite of our differences, despite our differences, or in overcoming our differences. Unity, the full recognition and validation of adoptive relationships as they really exist, comes amongst our differences. The diversity of the relationships that inform our interactions with others remains at

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<sup>149</sup> Weber, “ACLU: Forcing Faith.”

<sup>150</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy*, 21.

<sup>151</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy*, 24.

<sup>152</sup> Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy*, 21-22.



the forefront, and we are led to dwell on the beauty and struggles of adoptive relationships and all the ways they are both similar and drastically dissimilar to biological relationships.

Future research may survey the experiences of adoptees themselves, providing narratives to help illustrate the commonality of attitudes that intentionally and unintentionally diminish adoptive relationships within the Western Christian church. Furthermore, there is still much to be explored regarding *qi* and other types of human relationships, adoption within specific Christian denominations and monastic communities, and the ambiguous role of Chinese religions and philosophies in Chinese ethics of adoption. For now, Zhang Zai's concept of *qi* provides a theoretical starting point for us to reconsider the theory that informs our own assumptions on the family and parent-child relationships.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the differences between Neo-Confucianism and Christianity extend to the basic ideas of how families are defined and accepted within society. While Christianity has examples of adoptive relationships that are recognized and accepted in society, the ethics described by Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth do not provide a complete, balanced foundation for legitimizing adoptive relationships as being equal to biological relationships. The result is that in the Christian West, the root of a family begins with the needs of the adoptive parents and in finding a shared identity, whether that identity is by blood or through faith. The consequence of this ideological perspective towards adoption is a stigma against adoptees whose identities may not coincide with the identities of their adoptive family.

By taking on the concept of *qi* from Neo-Confucianism, Christian ethics of adoption may be grounded in a tradition that is naturally holistic and recognizes not just our shared humanity

and spirit, but also the diversity of identities that distinguish us from others. For adoption, this includes a characteristic that comes from the role economics and law in forming adoptive relationships. Although Christian doctrine also professes a belief that all people take part in God's family, Christian ethics of adoption come from a legal tradition that prioritizes the needs of adoptive parents over the needs of parentless children. Counteracting this tradition may be rectified by turning to *qi*, a notion whose perspective from a non-Western tradition opens up a new understanding of how adoptive relationships exist in myriad spiritual and material ways. Through *qi*, we have the opportunity to be introduced to a new beginning for Christian ethics of adoption that liberates adoptees from the clutches of white saviorism and assimilation and Christians from distorting God's love into an imperialistic missionary effort.

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