



John Sanders, “Nurturant Religion for a Better World.” For the Open and Relational Theology and its Social and Political Implications conference. December 7-8, 2022.

Several social scientists identify two major value systems that orient ways of life. For over thirty years, political scientists have used four questions to identify these two types. The questions pertain to four sets of characteristics people prefer in children.

- Independence or Respect for Elders
- Good Manners or Curiosity
- Well Behaved or Being Considerate
- Self-Reliance or Obedience

Those who chose independence, curiosity, being considerate, and self-reliance are strongly Nurturant. Those who select respect for elders, good manners, well behaved, and obedience are strongly Authoritative.¹ Researchers call these four questions their Rosetta Stone and use them in the *World Values Survey* of 108 countries representing 90% of the world’s population.

The answers to the questions accurately predict the types of books, movies, and vehicles you prefer. More significantly, they indicate your stances on a host of political and social issues such as whether women should have a role in the public sphere.

Nurturants

1. Core values: empathy, cooperation, perspective taking, the importance of community, and they are comfortable with the need for nuance and qualification.
2. Justice means making sure that all people have a solid opportunity to fulfill their potential in life. All should share the goods and services of society.

Authoritatives

1. Core Values: obedience to rules, maintaining social order, individual responsibility, and cognitive closure (certainty).
2. Justice means getting what you deserve. If you follow the rules, then you deserve a reward. If you break the rules, then you deserve punishment. Slogan: law and order.

My recent book, *Embracing Prodigals: Overcoming Authoritative Religion by Embracing Jesus’ Nurturing Grace* uses these two cognitive models to explain the polarization in American

¹ Of course, there are people who select some from each category and so are less prototypically Nurturant or Authoritative.



Christianity regarding many religious teachings and social issues. The core values and definition of justice each model employs motivate proponents to adopt very different views on religious and social matters.

Nurturant view of God:

- God has high expectations for the way we should live. God first manifests acceptance to get us to change the way we live.
- Divine justice seeks to enable all people to flourish.
- God loves/cares for everyone regardless of their faults including those outside the religious community.
- God takes human concerns into account (such as prayer).
- Those who believe in the Nurturing God describe God as forgiving, gracious, loving, accepting, not controlling, helping, caring, compassionate, generous, merciful, and tolerant.

Authoritative view of God:

- We must first change, then God will accept us.
- Divine justice gives everyone what they deserve: if they follow the rules, then they can go to heaven. If they disobey and stray from the straight path, then they go to hell.
- God loves the religious community and hates others.
- God does not take human concerns into account (such as prayer).
- Those who affirm the Authoritative God describe God as critical, punishing, judging, stern, wrathful, damning, disapproving, controlling, rigid, strict, and unforgiving.

Philosophers speak of God's "great making" properties. Often, this involves strong impassibility, and, for many Authoritatives, total control over others. However, if one begins with the values of Jesus, different great making properties can be selected. For Islam, consider the *Bismillah*. Each surah of the Qur'an begins, "In the name of God the compassionate, the merciful." I suggest that compassion and mercy are superior great making properties to unchangeability. In addition, consider some of the ninety-nine names of God such as forgiving, patient, guide, and *Al-Mujeeb* ("the responsive one"). Such great making properties cohere well with open and relational theology. A God with compassion who forgives those who stray from the path is greater than the strongly impassable deity who lacks compassion.



Sin

Nurturants frame sin in relational terms—it is about harming and breaking relationships.

Authoritatives think of sin as breaking rules that requires punishment. God hates those who disobey God's commandments.

Forgiveness

For Nurturants, God initiates forgiveness and uses it to motivate change.

For Authoritatives, humans must first change, then God will accept them.

Does God extend salvation to non-believers?

Authoritatives say no. God gave the rules of salvation! Heaven is restricted to those who followed the divine instructions, the rest get hell. This is justice because God gives each what they deserve.

Nurturants says yes. Several different views including (1) inclusivism and (2) postmortem opportunity.²

Hell

For Authoritatives hell is eternal conscious punishment. People are aware of their torment, and it lasts forever. God locks the gates of hell from the outside to keep people from escaping.

Nurturants find an eternal torture chamber incompatible with God's love and justice. What purpose does punishing people forever accomplish except vindictiveness? The purpose of judgment is to transform people. Some hold that the gates of hell are locked from the inside by the people themselves. They prefer views such as (1) annihilation and (2) universal salvation in which hell is restorative (restorative justice).

The Bible and the Qur'an

Nurturants see sacred texts as means of grace to shape our communities. They are an invitation to a way of life, not a list of rules to memorize. The religious community is open to using the best human reasoning in dialog with sacred texts.

² See Mohammad Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of the Others* (Oxford, 2012) and Sanders, *No Other Name* (Eerdmans, 1992).



Authoritatives see sacred texts as a rulebook for how to live. The rules are absolutes. Follow the rules and life turns out well for you. Sacred texts always have priority over human reasoning.

Cognitive Styles

- Nurturants believe it is virtuous to foster dialogue, perspective taking, empathy for others, and tolerance.
- Authoritatives do not value perspective taking. The only reason to learn the position of opponents is to know why they are wrong.
- Nurturants practice a “pilgrim” or “quest” theology that is always on the journey and thus open to changes.
- Authoritatives prefer a “fortress” theology where everything is already settled, and you defend it against your enemies.
- Nurturants use epistemic humility in their truth claims even while they argue for a particular position. Nuance and qualification are important.
- Authoritatives tend to hold their views with absolute certainty. They prefer black and white thinking without need of qualifications.
- Though Nurturants reject some positions, usually there is a constrained pluralism of acceptable views on a topic.
- Authoritatives score high on what psychologists call the “defensive theology scale.” There is only one correct view and if you do not affirm it, then you must be removed from the community. They do not like people asking questions about religious doctrines. “What if you are wrong?” The implication is that God punishes those with different beliefs.
- Nurturants affirm the importance of dialogue and usually are willing to compromise.
- Authoritatives place little value on dialogue and see compromise as selling out.

Social and Political Issues.

1. The different views on hell correspond to different approaches to criminal punishment. Authoritatives say we must be “tough on crime,” espouse the death penalty, and generally want to lock up criminals and throw away the key (as God does). Nurturants seek to restore the offender to the community because the purpose of judgment is to get people to change. This approach was enacted by the Truth and Justice Commission in South Africa after apartheid.



2. In America, there are huge income and wealth gaps, particularly along racial lines. Authoritatives claim that Whites deserve higher incomes and more net worth because they work harder. They believe everyone has adequate opportunities today. If you are not successful, blame yourself, not the system. Poverty would be abolished if people simply worked harder. They criticize Black Christians for relying on social programs instead of individual effort and for blaming institutions instead of themselves for their situation. Authoritatives who are poor believe that God is angry with them and so punishes their sins with low income. Religious Nurturants believe the government should change economic laws to ensure that everyone can fulfill their potential.
3. Nurturants believe that just like good roads and schools, health care should be provided to all. Authoritatives think health care is a commodity like cars and TV's. Only the successful deserve it.
4. Nurturants prefer democratic or shared governance. They favor deliberative discourse and seek to ensure that all people have a voice in decisions. Authoritatives favor autocratic leaders. Nurturants say it is important for a democracy to (1) protect the rights of those with unpopular views, (2) protect the rights of news organizations to criticize political leaders, and (3) right of nonviolent protest. Authoritatives tend to disagree. Many affirm the need for "a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress or elections."

Social science research shows that Nurturant values promote **better living**.³

- Studies from various countries with diverse cultures such as China, Pakistan, and Australia indicate that children raised by Nurturing parents and educators exhibit greater degrees of self-reliance, prosocial behavior, confidence in social settings, motivation to achieve, cheerfulness, self-control, and less substance abuse.
- Those who believe God is Nurturing are more likely to help others, including those who are religiously different. They are more cooperative, agreeable, and have better social relationships.
- Nurturants have significantly higher levels of conviction that their life has meaning, greater life satisfaction and have less loneliness. They are less dogmatic, have higher self-esteem along with significantly less depression, general anxiety, and obsessive-compulsion.
- Societies that are more Nurturant have lower death rates from natural disasters and infectious diseases.

³ For references to the research see John Sanders, *Embracing Prodigals* pages 8, 42-44, and 118-119.



Open and relational theologies can be key instruments in promoting Nurturant religion which leads to human flourishing for both individuals and societies.