

Childlike Faith

Cognitive Infantilization, Testimonial Dependence, and the Inversion of Epistemic Maturity

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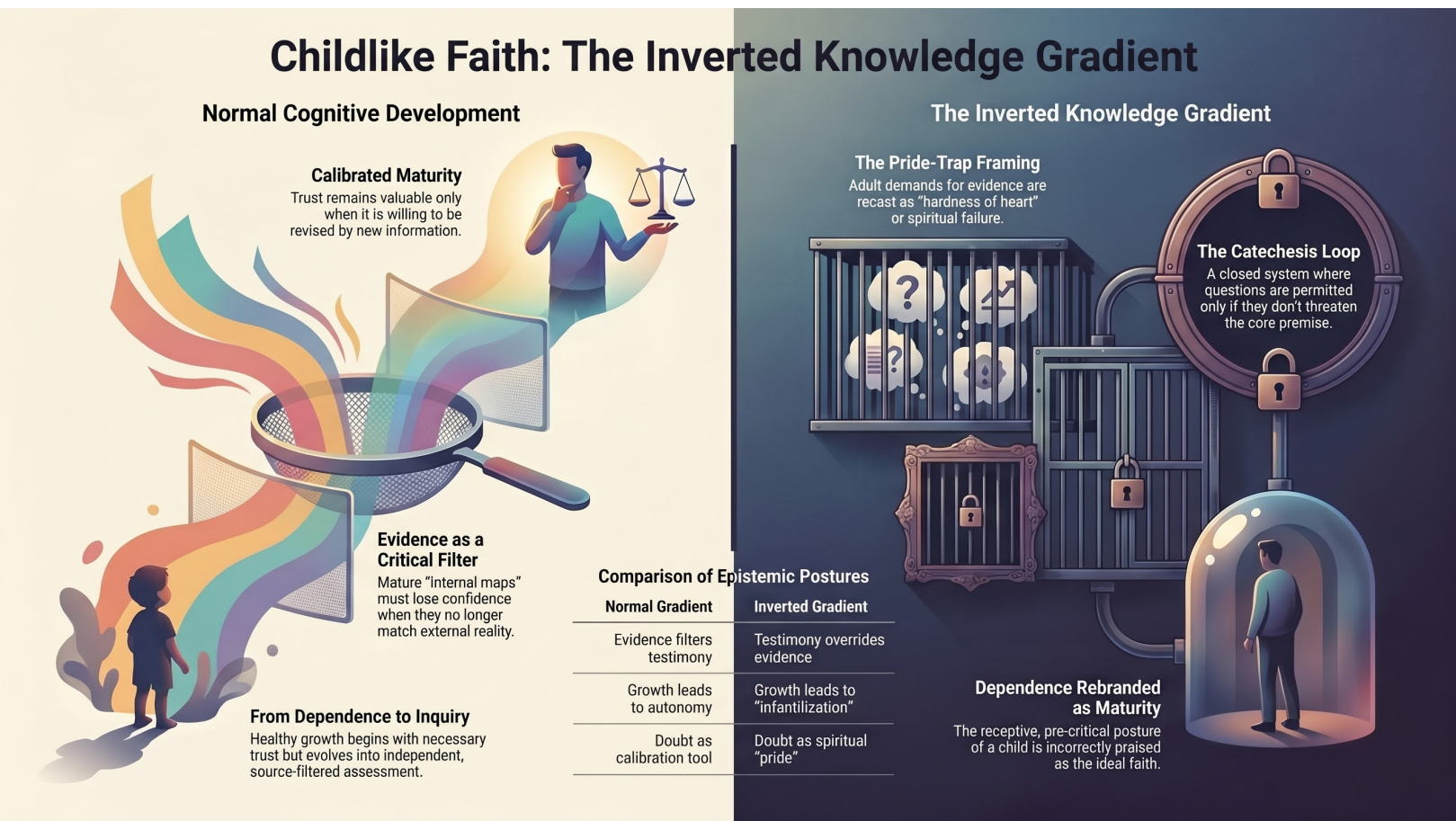
Central claim

Childhood reliance on testimony is rational because it enables learning before independent competence. It becomes an inversion of epistemic maturity when an adult's reduced scrutiny, asymmetrical deference, or inability to lower confidence is praised as the proper posture toward public Christian claims. Mature trust need not be independent or irreligious; it must be calibrated by competence, track record, defeaters, comparison, and permission to revise. The argument targets this use of childlikeness, not humility, receptivity, all religious authority, or Christianity's truth as such.

Preview:

Legitimate beginning	Mature transition	Epistemic inversion	Bounded result
A child must learn from trusted adults before independent checking is possible.	Development adds source comparison, reliability tracking, defeater recognition, and graded confidence.	A sacred authority receives less scrutiny precisely when its reliability is disputed, while doubt is redescribed as vice.	Childlikeness is benign as humility or receptivity; it is defective when used to disable adult correction.

Visual preview:



The diagram contrasts the developmental movement toward calibrated trust with a religious reversal that can rebrand dependence as maturity. It depicts the conditional pattern examined here, not every use of childhood imagery or every Christian community.

Abstract

Appeals to “childlike faith” can recommend humility, receptivity, dependence, or unguarded welcome. They become epistemically troubling when applied to adult confidence in contested claims about revelation, history, agency, and reality. This paper develops a conditional critique rather than treating every childhood metaphor as a demand for credulity. Research on testimonial learning shows both why children must depend on informants and why development increasingly involves selective trust, attention to accuracy and access, and revision when experience conflicts with testimony. Adult maturity therefore does not eliminate dependence; it calibrates it. I define cognitive infantilization as a practice that preserves or reinstates lower scrutiny by moralizing deference, concealing human mediation, applying asymmetric standards to home and rival authorities, or making confidence reduction socially impermissible. The resulting inversion is most serious when the authority’s reliability is the very point at issue, because childlike trust cannot establish that authority without circularity. Reformed epistemology and relational faith may license personal trust without supplying public comparative warrant. In response, I propose a five-part maturity audit focused on source access, competence, track record, defeaters, portable standards, and permissible revision. The conclusion is limited: childlikeness remains compatible with adult inquiry when it names openness or humility; it becomes epistemically defective when it protects public Christian claims from the correction expected elsewhere.

Keywords: childlike faith; Christian apologetics; testimony; epistemic maturity; selective trust; religious authority; intellectual humility

1. The Metaphor and the Epistemic Claim

“Childlike faith” is not one thesis. The phrase can praise wonder, dependence, teachability, low social status, freedom from status competition, or willingness to receive. It can also prescribe a way of believing: trust the sacred source with a child’s readiness, do not make assent wait on adult scrutiny, and treat resistance as pride rather than as a possible response to inadequate evidence. The first cluster can be morally attractive without carrying any rule about evidence. The second is an epistemic policy, because it governs how confidence should respond to testimony and doubt.

That distinction is indispensable. The sayings about receiving the divine kingdom as a child have a complex interpretive history; their mere presence does not settle which properties of children are normative. Even a brief historical treatment shows that Christian reflection connected the image with conversion, regeneration, dependence, and other theological themes rather than with one simple ideal of believing whatever one is told (Grant, 1946). It would therefore be careless to argue from a biblical childhood image directly to the charge of gullibility. The argument here begins later: with uses of childlikeness that recommend reduced adult scrutiny toward claims represented as divine.

The target is also narrower than religious trust in general. Human inquiry cannot proceed without testimony, education, institutions, and delegated expertise. Nor does the paper assume that autonomy means constructing one’s outlook alone. Its concern is a structural mismatch. In ordinary domains, developing competence normally brings finer discrimination among sources, clearer defeat conditions, and greater permission to revise. In the target practice, the contested sacred authority is granted a protected form of dependence precisely where mature filtering would otherwise increase. Lower scrutiny is then redescribed as higher virtue.

I call that pattern *cognitive infantilization*. The term does not diagnose a believer’s intelligence or emotional development. A brilliant adult can participate in an infantilizing authority relation, and a child can display striking discrimination. The term identifies a norm imposed on inquiry: the adult’s capacity to compare, question, or withdraw confidence is restrained in the name of a relation modeled on childhood dependence.

Three scope limits follow. First, the argument is conditional. It applies where childlike language actually lowers scrutiny, moralizes doubt, or protects an authority; its prevalence is an empirical question not settled here. Second, defective belief maintenance does not entail that the maintained belief is false. A true belief can be defended badly. Third, the standard must travel. Political, familial, medical, scientific, and secular ideological

authorities can infantilize too. Religious practice receives attention because it combines public truth claims with an unusually powerful language of sacred dependence.

Developmental-Inversion Principle

Dependence that is rational because a learner lacks the capacity to assess a source does not become an adult epistemic ideal merely because the source is described as sacred. The adult relation is mature only if increased capacity produces at least as much access to calibration, defeat, comparison, and responsible revision.

2. Why Childhood Trust Is Rational

Children are not defective adults waiting to become solitary investigators. They enter a social world whose language, causal knowledge, history, norms, and categories are already in use. Direct experience cannot provide most of what they need to know. Testimony is therefore not a regrettable substitute for knowledge; it is one of the principal routes by which knowledge becomes possible. Paul Harris's synthesis documents how extensively children learn about remote, invisible, historical, and counterintuitive matters from what others tell them (Harris, 2012). A child cannot personally rediscover microbes, continental history, or the composition of distant planets before benefiting from them.

This dependence is rational for at least three reasons. The child has limited access to relevant evidence, caregivers often possess a large competence advantage, and refusing testimony would impose enormous opportunity costs. The rational alternative to accepting a caregiver's warning about traffic is not an independent controlled trial. In many cases, trusting first is what permits the learner to survive and eventually understand.

Yet dependence is not indiscriminate. Research on selective trust has repeatedly complicated the picture of the uniformly credulous child. Preschoolers can use an informant's prior accuracy and ignorance when deciding whom to believe, with this discrimination becoming more reliable across development (Koenig & Harris, 2005). Children also attend to familiarity, consensus, confidence, group membership, access to information, and the kind of mistake an informant made. Reviews of this work emphasize a developing appraisal system, not a simple transition from trust to distrust (Harris & Corriveau, 2011; Harris et al., 2018).

The details matter for the argument. Selective-trust findings do not show that children are miniature scientists, and individual studies do not establish a universal developmental ladder. Children may defer for social reasons, overvalue consensus, or struggle to integrate cues. But the broad lesson is robust enough: testimonial learning involves source-sensitive discrimination, and increasing competence provides more resources for that discrimination. Work on children's developing critical stance similarly treats doubt as something to be calibrated to information about speakers, motives, knowledge, and claims, not as an undifferentiated virtue (Mills, 2013).

Experience can also revise trust. In an experimental study, young children updated confidence in an informant's claim when later experience indicated otherwise (Hermansen et al., 2021). Such updating expresses the crucial developmental point. Early reliance is not valuable because the child remains dependent; it is valuable because it connects the child to a world in which trust can acquire a track record. A caregiver's status may justify an initial presumption, but interaction supplies information about whether that presumption should persist.

Religious concepts illustrate both the power and limitation of testimony. Children learn much about scientific and religious matters through similar social channels, especially where the objects are not open to straightforward observation (Harris & Koenig, 2006). This does not equate the truth of scientific and religious claims or reduce either to social transmission. It shows that confidence can be acquired from trusted speakers before the learner possesses independent discriminating evidence. The same general channel can transmit true claims, false claims, and claims whose status remains contested. The existence of trust explains uptake; it does not by itself certify the content.

3. Maturity Is Calibrated Dependence

It would be a mistake to answer childlike faith with an ideal of testimonial self-sufficiency. Adults continue to depend on experts, witnesses, institutions, and inherited practices. No competent adult verifies personally the chemical composition of medicine, the engineering of every bridge, or the archival basis of every historical claim. Epistemic autonomy cannot require refusal of such dependence. Elizabeth Fricker's discussion of testimony and autonomy instead places weight on the hearer's responsibility to monitor speakers and circumstances while acknowledging the necessity of trust (Fricker, 2006).

Maturity is therefore not independence from testimony but *calibrated dependence*. Calibration links confidence to relevant features of a source and claim. These include whether the source had access to the fact, possesses competence in the domain, has a record that can be checked, faces incentives to distort, acknowledges uncertainty, and responds appropriately to correction. The appropriate mix varies. A child's trust in a parent, a patient's trust in a physician, and a historian's trust in an archive do not share one simple formula. They share the possibility that reasons for deference can be distinguished from reasons to suspend it.

Epistemic authority can be philosophically defensible without being infallible. Linda Zagzebski argues for a substantial role for trust and authority in an autonomous life, challenging the assumption that deference and autonomy are always opposed (Zagzebski, 2012). That insight strengthens rather than weakens the present critique. If authority can be rational, we should identify what makes it so. Merely applying the honorific *divine* to a mediated human claim does not perform that work.

The distinction between *deference* and *submission* is useful. Deference assigns another person's judgment added weight because of competence, access, or earned standing. It remains bounded by domain and defeasible by contrary information. Epistemic submission asks the hearer to subordinate her assessment even when the authority's standing is exactly what is disputed. In the first relation, authority is a reason entering deliberation. In the second, the authority controls which reasons may count against itself.

Table 1 turns this distinction into a practical ledger. It is not a mechanical scorecard. Its purpose is to reveal whether trust is attached to answerable features or secured by status alone.

Calibration feature	Mature question	Positive indicator	Warning sign
Access	How could this source know this claim?	The route to the information is disclosed and independently intelligible.	Claimed access is private, mediated, or disputed but treated as self-authenticating.
Competence	What makes the source reliable in this domain?	Training, methods, or demonstrated judgment fit the claim.	Status in one role silently expands into authority over every question.
Track record	What past successes and errors are visible?	Accuracy and correction can be compared over time.	Successes are counted while failures are redescribed or forgotten.
Defeaters	What would lower confidence?	Counterevidence and rival explanations receive prospective weight.	Doubt is treated chiefly as disloyalty, pride, temptation, or defective character.
Revision	What may responsibly change?	Confidence can decrease without social or moral punishment.	The learner may ask questions but the authorized conclusion cannot be surrendered.

Table 1: A trust-calibration ledger. Rational deference need not satisfy every indicator equally, but sacred status cannot substitute for the entire ledger.

This model also clarifies intellectual humility. On one influential account, humility centrally involves proper attention to one's intellectual limitations (Whitcomb et al., 2017). Such attention may increase deference when

another knows more. It may also decrease deference when a source conceals error, exceeds its competence, or forbids checking. Humility is not a directional command always to believe less in oneself and more in authority. It is accurate ownership of limitation wherever the limitation lies.

4. How the Gradient Is Inverted

The normal developmental movement begins with unavoidable reliance and acquires better filters. An inverted knowledge gradient preserves the emotional authority of the first stage while selectively disabling the second. The adult is asked to become more dependent, less demanding, or more willing to accept when the sacred claim faces pressure. The reduction in scrutiny is then redescribed as spiritual ascent.

This inversion can be recognized without speculating about anyone's motives. It appears in practices with four recurring features.

First, *deference is moralized*. A question about evidence is translated into a question about the inquirer's character: Is she proud, hardened, rebellious, unwilling to receive, or attached to sin? Character can affect inquiry, but a character diagnosis does not answer the evidential question. When the diagnosis is applied chiefly to doubt and rarely to overconfidence, it protects the favored conclusion.

Second, *mediation is concealed*. The believer is invited to imagine a direct relation between creature and Christian deity, yet the relevant propositions arrive through canon formation, translation, commentary, preaching, family, education, and personal interpretation. To say that one submits to divine authority does not identify which fallible human judgment correctly conveys that authority. The epistemic work lies in that identification.

Third, *standards are asymmetric*. Home-tradition testimony receives charity, harmonization, and cumulative support, while rival testimony is explained by culture, error, desire, or deception. Apparent answers to prayer receive evidential credit, while silence is made compatible with wisdom, timing, or mystery. Any single explanation may be reasonable. The inversion appears when no accumulation of unfavorable cases can create comparable loss.

Fourth, *exit is moralized*. Questions may be welcomed so long as they end in restored confidence. Reduced confidence, change of tradition, or nonbelief is treated not merely as an intellectual conclusion but as failure of fidelity. The community thereby permits inquiry as activity while restricting inquiry as correction.

These features distinguish a rich religious education from infantilization. Catechesis can teach history, doctrine, languages, arguments, and interpretive alternatives. The amount of intellectual material is not decisive. A system may be sophisticated yet closed at the point that matters: whether its central authority can lose standing. Conversely, a simple devotional practice need not infantilize if adults may distinguish metaphor from evidence, acknowledge mediation, and revise without disgrace.

5. The Authority-Bootstrapping Problem

The strongest form of the problem emerges when the believer says that childlike trust is appropriate because the ultimate source is perfectly knowledgeable and good. If a perfectly reliable Christian deity directly communicated a proposition, trusting that communication would indeed differ from trusting an ordinary human. But in apologetic disagreement, that conditional rarely resolves the issue. The questions are whether such a source exists, whether this message came from it, and which interpretation conveys the message. Those are the claims under dispute.

An authority cannot establish its own contested reliability merely by requiring childlike trust. Consider a community that presents a text as revelation, interprets the text through inherited doctrine, and then cites the interpreted text to certify both revelation and interpreter. The structure may be internally coherent, and additional arguments may support it. Yet the demand for deference cannot itself supply the missing independent comparison. Otherwise rival communities can bootstrap incompatible authorities in the same way.

Childlikeness reading	What it commends	Relation to inquiry	Epistemic verdict
Receptivity	Willingness to hear, learn, wonder, and admit dependence.	Compatible with scrutiny and revision.	Potential virtue; no inference to credulity follows.
Low status	Refusal of domination, prestige, or self-importance.	Concerns moral posture more directly than source reliability.	Important theological possibility; not an evidential rule.
Provisional trust	Reliance while access or competence is limited.	Rational when paired with later calibration and correction.	Developmentally necessary and defeasible.
Protected deference	Reduced scrutiny toward a sacred source whose standing is disputed.	Restricts defeaters, comparison, or permissible confidence loss.	Epistemic inversion when used for public truth claims.

Table 2: The childlikeness fork. Criticism of protected deference does not discredit the other readings.

This is why human mediation matters. The adult believer does not encounter an unambiguous divine speaker under publicly controlled conditions. She encounters reports, traditions, experiences, arguments, and institutions that attribute speech or action to a God-concept. Each route may deserve investigation. None becomes infallible merely because its content says that the source is infallible.

Alvin Plantinga's Reformed epistemology offers a more serious position than simple authoritarian bootstrapping. His model argues that Christian belief could possess warrant noninferentially if the relevant theological account is true and the belief-forming processes function properly in the intended environment (Plantinga, 2000). This can challenge the claim that religious belief must always be inferred from public evidence to be rational. It does not make childlike dependence an adult ideal, and it does not by itself establish which putative religious deliverance outsiders should trust.

The distinction is between *personal entitlement* and *public comparative warrant*. A person may be entitled to trust an experience, practice, or seeming without first defeating every rival theory. Public apologetics makes a further move: it asks others to judge one religious account as a better description of reality. That comparative task requires attention to rival deliverances, disagreement, error patterns, and shared defeat conditions. Invoking childlike trust at that stage removes the bridge that public persuasion needs.

Relational language does not remove the problem. Trust between persons often outruns explicit evidence because a history of interaction supplies tacit knowledge, mutual vulnerability, and a track record. But whether an unseen personal agent exists and has entered such a relation remains partly a factual question. Calling confidence a relationship may describe its lived character; it cannot exempt the attribution of agency from every possibility of mistake.

No-Privilege-Without-Identification

Perfect authority would warrant extensive trust if correctly identified. Where the identity, message, or interpreter of that authority is contested, however, a demand for childlike trust cannot serve as its own identification procedure. The reasons that select this authority over rivals must remain open to adult comparison.

6. Portable Standards and the Childhood-Channel Comparison

The comparison between childhood religious belief and beliefs about figures such as Santa Claus is easily abused. The two objects are not equivalent in cultural depth, philosophical articulation, or possible truth. Equating them

by ridicule would avoid the real argument. The relevant comparison concerns a *channel of acquisition*: a trusted adult community can generate high confidence in claims that a child cannot independently check.

That channel is content-neutral. It can transmit elementary mathematics, family history, civic myths, prejudices, religious doctrine, and fictional traditions. Because the channel carries both truth and error, confidence produced through it needs later calibration. The adult question is not, “Did people I trusted teach this?” but “What now distinguishes the reliability of this teaching from incompatible teachings acquired through the same kind of trust?”

Portable standards are crucial here. A standard is portable when one would accept its use by a rival community with the conclusion reversed. If personal transformation supports one tradition, how should similar transformation elsewhere count? If communal antiquity supports a canon, what does antiquity do for incompatible canons? If inward certainty defeats doubt at home, why does inward certainty not settle the matter for outsiders? The demand is not that all testimony receive equal weight. It is that differences in weight be explained without presupposing the conclusion.

Epistemic vigilance research provides a helpful general frame. Human communication is extraordinarily beneficial but exposes hearers to misinformation; accordingly, people possess mechanisms for evaluating both sources and content (Sperber et al., 2010). Those mechanisms are imperfect and socially shaped, but their purpose is not hostility to testimony. They make large-scale testimonial learning possible by limiting exploitation. A religious instruction to suspend those mechanisms therefore needs more justification, not less, when the content is important and difficult to verify.

The same symmetry applies to nonreligious criticism. A skeptic who automatically discounts every religious report while accepting congenial secular testimony violates portability too. So does a naturalist who explains opponents causally but treats personal commitments as transparent products of reason. The maturity test is not a disguised rule that only religious confidence must decrease. It asks all parties to disclose why their sources deserve unequal weight and what could change that judgment.

7. The Catechesis Loop and Motivated Defense

A community can permit extensive questioning while protecting its authorized conclusion. The resulting *catechesis loop* has three stages: doubt is redirected into approved study and spiritual practice; contrary considerations are interpreted within the protected framework; the return of confidence is then treated as evidence that the process succeeded. Motion occurs, but the legitimate endpoint is fixed.

The loop is not defined by reading theology, consulting mentors, praying, or remaining in community. Each can be reasonable. It is defined by asymmetric exit conditions. If renewed assent is classified as honest inquiry while continued doubt is classified as pride, spiritual attack, moral failure, or insufficient openness, the framework has converted its conclusion into a character test. The doubter may examine arguments, but she may not conclude that they fail without acquiring a moral deficit.

Psychological research cannot establish that a religion is false, nor can it diagnose a particular believer from a distance. It can explain why institutional correction is necessary. Kunda’s account of motivated reasoning emphasizes that desired conclusions influence which beliefs and strategies people access, while still constraining them to construct apparently reasonable justifications (Kunda, 1990). Mercier and Sperber argue that reasoning is deeply adapted to producing and evaluating arguments in social contexts; its strengths in exchange can coexist with a bias toward defending one’s prior position (Mercier & Sperber, 2011). These mechanisms are human, not uniquely Christian.

Religious inquiry can intensify the ordinary pressures because the stakes include family, identity, moral standing, community, existential hope, and fear of loss. Again, this fact does not refute the belief. It raises the value of practices that make contrary evidence socially survivable. A person who would lose relationships or be treated as morally compromised for reducing confidence faces a cost that is independent of the evidence. Calling endurance “childlike faith” can hide that cost beneath a positive moral image.

The mature alternative is not a demand for affectless reasoning. It is institutional permission for belief to change. A truth-oriented community should be able to distinguish a person's worth and belonging from the current strength of her assent. It should teach the strongest rival arguments, record failed expectations as well as successes, and permit members to say "I no longer know" without making that report evidence of vice.

8. Six Objections

8.1 The metaphor praises humility, not gullibility

This is often correct, and Table 2 preserves the distinction. If childlikeness names low status, openness, or freedom from domination, the present critique does not apply. The objection becomes a defense of the paper's narrowing, not a refutation of it. Trouble begins only when moral humility is used to weaken an adult's evidential filters. Humility before reality should increase willingness to be corrected, including by unwelcome evidence.

8.2 All adults rely on authorities

Yes. The argument rejects testimonial individualism. But universal dependence does not make every authority equally reliable or every form of submission rational. Precisely because adults must defer, they need second-order judgments about access, competence, track record, incentives, and correction. The fact that a patient relies on physicians does not justify a physician who forbids second opinions and treats noncompliance as a moral defect.

8.3 The Christian deity is categorically unlike human experts

A perfectly knowledgeable and good deity would be unlike a fallible expert. The problem is identification through fallible channels. One cannot infer from "If this message comes from a perfect source, it is reliable" to "This contested message comes from that source" without additional premises. Childlike deference cannot establish those premises without making incompatible traditions equally self-certifying.

8.4 Faith is a relationship, not a hypothesis

Relationships involve trust that is not reconstructed from evidence at every moment. They also involve recognition, interaction, memory, interpretation, and the possibility of misidentifying another's motives or even presence. Public claims that a particular unseen agent acted, spoke, commanded, or raised a historical person are not rendered nonfactual by their relational importance. Relational meaning can justify patience; it cannot guarantee the attribution.

8.5 Skepticism can be proud and destructive

Certainly. Doubt can be selective, performative, or motivated. That possibility supports symmetric correction, not protected deference. A skeptic should apply portable standards and acknowledge limits just as a believer should. The remedy for arrogant criticism is disciplined criticism, not the elevation of lower scrutiny into a sacred ideal.

8.6 This is an empirical caricature of Christian practice

It would be a caricature if the paper claimed that all or most Christian communities fit the model without evidence. It makes no such prevalence claim. The paper defines a conditional failure pattern, explains why it is epistemically defective, and supplies observable indicators. Determining how often the pattern occurs would require interviews, teaching materials, longitudinal observation, and comparison across communities. Particular communities can

answer the critique by showing that they welcome adult calibration, acknowledge mediation, preserve portable standards, and permit costly revision.

9. Adult Humility: A Positive Model

Adult epistemic maturity is neither lonely self-reliance nor reflexive distrust. It is the capacity to depend without surrendering responsibility for how dependence is allocated. It accepts that every person begins inside a tradition and remains vulnerable to social influence. It also builds routes by which inherited confidence can be tested, reduced, or redirected.

Five practices follow.

First, *name the claim at the right level*. General theism, a particular God-concept, the authority of a canon, an interpretation of a passage, and a report of providential action are different claims. Confidence in one does not automatically transfer to the others.

Second, *map the human chain*. Ask how the claim reached the believer: family, text, translation, institution, experience, inference, or some mixture. Mapping a cause does not debunk the claim. It reveals where error could enter and where corroboration is needed.

Third, *publish defeat conditions*. The community need not pretend that one anomaly should overturn an entire worldview. It should still identify patterns that would lower confidence: repeated failed predictions, historical evidence, better rival explanations, unreliability in alleged messengers, or persistent asymmetry in evidential rules.

Fourth, *apply portable standards*. Arguments accepted for the home tradition should remain acceptable when used by a rival unless a relevant difference is shown. This discipline turns comparison from an identity contest into an evidential one.

Fifth, *protect responsible revision*. Members must be able to reduce confidence, suspend judgment, or leave without the conclusion itself becoming proof of corruption. Social consequences cannot be eliminated, but a community can refuse to weaponize them.

Maturity audit	Question for the believer or community	Evidence of correction	Bounded implication
Claim precision	Which exact proposition is receiving confidence?	Adjacent claims are separated rather than bundled.	Prevents authority from silently expanding.
Mediation map	Through which human judgments did the claim arrive?	Translation, interpretation, and institutional roles are explicit.	Makes fallibility visible without presuming falsity.
Defeater rule	What pattern would materially lower confidence?	Loss conditions are stated before the outcome.	Gives contrary evidence somewhere to register.
Portability	Would the rule be accepted if a rival used it?	Relevant similarities and differences are compared openly.	Restrains home-tradition privilege.
Revision permission	May a responsible person conclude that confidence should fall?	Doubt, suspension, and exit do not trigger character condemnation.	Separates truth-seeking from retention.

Table 3: An adult-maturity audit for religious and nonreligious authority relations.

These practices do not decide the truth of Christianity in advance. A Christian community might satisfy them and retain robust belief. Indeed, if its claims are well grounded, better calibration should improve their standing. The practices remove only one protective strategy: praising reduced adult correction as childlike virtue.

The positive model also recovers what is attractive in the metaphor. Wonder can motivate inquiry. Receptivity can interrupt arrogance. Dependence can remind adults that knowledge is socially distributed. Trust can make learning possible before every reason is explicit. None of these goods requires adults to surrender source criticism or treat confidence loss as disobedience. Childlikeness becomes defensible when joined to, rather than substituted for, mature correction.

10. Conclusion

Childhood trust is not irrational. It is a necessary response to limited access and competence, and human beings never entirely outgrow testimonial dependence. What changes with maturity is not the need for others but the capacity and responsibility to calibrate that need. Sources acquire differentiated standing; errors alter trust; counterevidence gains force; and confidence becomes revisable.

The inversion examined here occurs when a religious authority relation preserves the dependency of the first stage while giving it the honor of the last. Adult scrutiny is reduced, doubt is moralized, human mediation disappears from view, home and rival testimony receive unequal rules, or inquiry is permitted only when assent returns. In that setting, “childlike faith” does not name humility. It makes reduced correction look like maturity.

The conclusion remains conditional. It does not determine how common the pattern is, disprove Christianity, deny noninferential personal entitlement, or oppose all authority. It does establish a burden. Anyone who commends childlikeness for adult belief about public reality should specify which feature of childhood is being praised and show how competence, comparison, defeaters, and responsible revision remain intact.

Adult humility is not the refusal to trust. It is the willingness to discover that trust has been misplaced. A faith able to preserve wonder while accepting that liability has no need to praise the nursery as an epistemic destination.

Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central inference can be stated without treating every form of childlikeness alike.

1. A practice is epistemically mature only if increased adult competence may improve source discrimination, register defeaters, compare rival authorities by portable standards, and permit responsible revision.
2. Childhood testimonial dependence is rational largely because the child initially lacks the access and competence required for those tasks.
3. A practice inverts the developmental basis of that dependence when it praises the preservation or reinstatement of lower scrutiny after the relevant adult capacities are available.
4. Uses of childlike faith that moralize deference, conceal human mediation, apply asymmetric standards, or prohibit confidence reduction preserve or reinstate lower scrutiny toward contested public Christian claims.
5. Therefore, uses of childlike faith with those features invert epistemic maturity and do not earn public warrant merely from the virtue-language of humility or trust.

Premises 1 and 3 are normative and conceptual. Premise 2 is supported by work on testimonial dependence and selective trust. Premise 4 is application-sensitive and must be established for a particular teaching or community rather than presumed universally. The conclusion concerns the epistemic quality of the practice; it does not entail the falsity of the belief it protects.

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