

## Essay Review

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AVNER GIL'ADI, *Children of Islam: concepts of childhood in medieval Muslim society*, St Antony's/Macmillan Series, Basingstoke and Oxford, Macmillan in association with St Antony's College, 1992, pp. xii, 176, £40.00 (0-333-55598-8).

This volume is a collection of eight studies by the author on various aspects of the history of childhood in medieval Islamic society. A useful introduction surveys the extant Arabic source material for the history of childhood and considers its relation to similar literature in the Hellenistic tradition. Two essays on the new-born infant discuss a Damascene childrearing manual, the *Tuhfat al-mawdūd* by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya (d. 751/1350), and consider the origins of the childhood rite of *tahnīk*, i.e. rubbing an infant's palate with chewed dates. In the area of child education Gil'adi assesses the views of the renowned theologian, jurist, and mystic al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and the place of corporal punishment in medieval Islamic educational thought. In what is probably the most substantial part of the book, three studies provide close analyses of child mortality, the theme of parental steadfastness (*ṣabr*) in times of bereavement, and the difficult and controversial question of infanticide. The work as a whole is an Arabist's contribution to the social history of medieval Islam, but Gil'adi's wide reading in the history of childhood in the Graeco-Roman world of classical and late antiquity, as well as in medieval and early modern Europe, enables him to offer many cross-cultural observations and lends his studies an important interdisciplinary dimension.

The author stresses that his book comprises a series of separate studies rather than a history of childhood in medieval Islam, but several significant themes do seem to be pursued throughout the work. The first of these is the medieval Islamic view of childhood as a unique period in an individual's life, one posing its own special problems and concerns. Among Muslims it was universally conceded that the care of infants and small children required special understanding and treatment; and from Arabic literature generally, and treatises in obstetrics and paediatrics in particular, it emerges that the hygienic, pathological, therapeutic, and educational issues raised in connection with infants and children were all regarded as specific to them, as opposed to adults. There was also a fully developed Arabic vocabulary for children and for a broad range of issues and problems specific to childhood. This of course stands in striking contrast to the views of Philippe Ariès and his theory that in Europe childhood was not "discovered" until fairly recent times. As Gil'adi observes on several occasions, the ways in which medieval Muslims conceptualized childhood can in part be traced to Hellenistic thinking; he holds back from pursuing the argument further, but the implication of his conclusions with respect to Islamic society is clearly that medieval and early modern European views of childhood are unlikely to have been so ambiguous (much less non-existent) when Hellenistic and Islamic views, known in Europe through Latin translations, were sharply defined and pursued in depth.

A second theme is the complex and ambivalent ways in which medieval Islamic society viewed and reacted to children and childhood. Some stressed the innocence of childhood and adopted a fairly permissive attitude toward the young, while others were more restrictive, pointing out that unless taught and disciplined to control his desires, a child could easily go astray. While evidence for harsh corporal punishment and occasional infanticide suggests what in modern parlance would be "negative" concepts of childhood, this is far outweighed by material demonstrating that adults were profoundly concerned for the welfare of children and developed deep personal and emotional bonds with them: parents fretted over contradictory choices in infant care, delighted in their child's first smile and first steps, worried over their own role in child development and education, encouraged play and childhood games, grieved enormously if a child died, and were devastated by the sudden reappearance of a forgotten favourite toy of a deceased child. Overall, parents, teachers, physicians, and others held themselves responsible for the eventual integration of children into adult society, but then, as now, disagreed on how this could best be accomplished. Here a sharp contrast to Ariès' "thesis of indifference" is to be observed, and once again one suspects that the discrepancy has to do not with distinctions between medieval European and Middle Eastern societies, but rather with the problematic views of Ariès and his disciples.

Particularly important is Gil'adi's assessment of the development of Islamic views of childhood and their relation to Hellenistic thinking. The specific problems of childhood were much discussed by Greek authors of classical and late antiquity, and through Arabic translations their formulations became known to Muslim, Christian, and Jewish philosophers and physicians in the medieval Islamic world. As this material became more widely available, especially through the circulation of pedagogical, ethical, and paediatric texts, it was modified and developed in accordance with the concerns and needs of a deeply religious society. Questions of infant selection, for example, were entirely excluded from medieval Middle Eastern gynaecological and paediatric writings, though such matters had routinely been discussed in antiquity, and paediatrics in general was a field far more specialized and developed in Islamic times than it had been earlier. As the examples of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya demonstrate, the spread of Greek ideas to religious scholars subjected these ideas to modification and development in light of new social and religious concerns.

The author frequently stresses the problems involved in seeking to describe social realities on the basis of texts which are essentially prescriptive in nature, but reservations of precisely this kind may be raised concerning a few of his arguments. 1) Child mortality in the Black Death and later plague epidemics is cited as the primary reason for the sudden proliferation of consolation treatises for bereaved parents in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries (p. 86), but the explanation may in fact not be so simple. The plague had been as grave a problem in the sixth to eighth centuries as it was to be later, but while plague stories contributed to the general consolation treatises of the ninth century, they certainly did not dominate them and cannot be regarded as a primary factor in their compilation. In fact, there were numerous diseases (e.g. smallpox and dysentery) which must have been leading killers of children throughout the medieval period, but which did not receive as much attention in the sources as the plague did. On the other hand, the emergence of what amount to specialized sub-genres is a prominent feature in Arabic literature generally in the Mamlūk period, and the parental bereavement texts may simply be yet another illustration of this process. 2) In Gil'adi's attempted reconstruction of "the whole narration" of the story of Abū Ṭalḥa and Umm Sulaym from "its various partial versions" (pp. 95–7), he seems to assume that a reconstruction containing as many details as possible bears some superior validity in terms of historical truth. It is likely, however, that many details simply represent late arbitrary additions introduced to resolve questions which shorter earlier versions had not addressed. And as the aim of the story was entirely didactic (i.e. to promote steadfastness among bereaved parents, p. 78), the possibility of a complete fiction is not to be ruled out. Such a fiction would still, however, illustrate the reality of high mortality among children, otherwise the tale would be pointless. 3) In considering the discussion of infanticide in sources post-dating the Qur'ān (pp. 105–15), Gil'adi concedes that these materials "sometimes mirror the image of the Jāhiliyya in medieval Islam no less, possibly more, than they do historical reality" (p. 105), but suggests that infanticide may in fact have been practised at the time these sources were being compiled. Here again, however, a recurrent pattern of later writers who "know" things of which their predecessors are entirely unaware is suspicious.

Gil'adi rightly observes (p. x) that many sources which could contribute to his subject remain untouched, so it is perhaps appropriate to suggest some fruitful directions for pursuit of these materials. Arabic poetry is certainly one of the most neglected areas, but is incredibly rich in insights on childhood and family history. Most of the major compendia of *belles-lettres* (*adab*) contain valuable data, and some bear special chapters relevant to the subject. The literature on *al-faraj ba'd al-shidda* ("deliverance after adversity") is very important, especially the text bearing this title by al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994), ed. 'Abbūd al-Shālījī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1398/1978). An early consolation treatise of particular value is al-Mubarrad (d. 285/896), *Al-Ta'āzī wa-l-marāthī*, ed. Muḥammad al-Dībājī (Damascus: Majma' al-lughā al-'arabiya bi-Dimashq, 1936/1976).

The high cost of *Children of Islam* may limit its availability, and that would be unfortunate. Apart from its own important contribution to our knowledge, it suggests numerous useful directions for future investigation and fully achieves its author's aim of providing a starting point for further research.

Lawrence I. Conrad, Wellcome Institute