

THE CONTINUING VITALITY OF THE TRADITION: A CLASSICAL MUSLIM PARADIGM OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY

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Sustained reflection on the nature of children has animated intellectual and socio-cultural history in a number of arenas: the Ancient world, the European West, Byzantium. Yet, little work has been done in the Islamic context. However, even a survey of relevant, though disparate and scattered texts, shows that children were for Muslims a serious intellectual and moral concern. The work of abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505 A.H./1111 CE) provides important data from which to reconstruct a theory of childhood as a distinct stage in the "ages of life," a period that imposed special duties upon parents. The current study examines and constructs a Ghazālīan theory of the child and childhood. His thought delineates in clear relief societal ideals and behavioral norms that combined to facilitate the social goal of rearing morally upright, educated, empathetic, and civic-minded young people. My research discovers, reconstructs, and explains the genesis of *childhood* within Islam by investigating the thought of a premier thinker with the pre-modern Muslim intellectual tradition. My research also shows definitively the continuing significance and vitality of traditional Islamic socio-cultural and intellectual values surrounding the child and its enviroing family.

Keywords: Muslim Concept of Childhood, abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), Medieval Muslim Family

LA VITALIDAD EN PROGRESO DE LA TRADICIÓN: UN CLÁSICO PARADIGMA MUSULMÁN DE LOS NIÑOS Y LA FAMILIA

La sostenida reflexión sobre la naturaleza de los niños ha animado a la historia intelectual y socio-cultural en diferentes ámbitos: el Mundo Antiguo, el Occidente Europeo, Bizancio. Sin embargo, poco se ha hecho en el contexto islámico. No obstante, incluso un estudio de textos relevantes, aunque dispersos y aislados, muestra que los niños fueron para los musulmanes, una seria preocupación intelectual y moral. El trabajo de abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505 A.H./1111 CE), brinda datos importantes a partir de los cuales reconstruir una teoría de la niñez como una etapa distintiva en las "edades de la vida", un período que impuso deberes especiales sobre los padres. Este estudio examina y construye una teoría Ghazaliana del niño y la niñez. Su pensamiento pone en claro relieve ideales societales y normas de comportamiento que se combinaron para facilitar el objetivo social de la crianza de los jóvenes moralmente recta, educada, empática y con conciencia cívica. Mi investigación descubre, reconstruye y explica la génesis de la niñez en el Islam, investigando el pensamiento de un primer pensador con la tradición intelectual musulmana pre-moderna. Mi investigación también muestra definitivamente la continua significancia y vitalidad de los valores tradicionales socio-culturales e intelectuales islámicos que rodearon al niño y su entorno familiar.

Palabras claves: Concepto musulmán de la infancia, abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d.505/1111), familia musulmana medieval

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Introduction

Scholars have devoted significant research to understanding childhood, children and families in the European West in virtually every historical period, from classical Antiquity to the modern era.¹

By contrast, the pre-modern child in the world beyond Europe remains in chiaroscuro, heavily shadowed and enticingly impressionistic. This work approaches the study of children and childhood in the medieval non-Western world by relying upon the use of broad assumptions which positively linked diverse ethnic and racial groups who, while residing in disparate geographic regions, were bound together by the cardinal linchpins of a unitary cultural ethos. In presenting an ethics of children and childhood within the context of the family relationship, I am conscious of the fact that the study of the pre-modern Muslim family, particularly in the classical period of Islam, is difficult because the theological and philosophical sources tend to present idealized image of sectors of society. These sources present the optimal.

The textual evidence thus may diverge from the lived experience of families, then as well as now. It is historically important, nevertheless, to uncover what those who wrote thought about the family and the members of the family unit. It is quite evident that key concepts which focused on the scriptural sources with the leavening of observation of children and their needs for emotional nurturance and education undergirded a distinctly Muslim understanding of the child, childhood and the family. Vast numbers of people lived that story according to the precepts of the world culture of Islam. I present here the theory of the child and of childhood enunciated by al-Ghazālī. Articulated with such clarity, tenderness, and force his paradigmatic understanding remains a vivifying link to past tradition in the most important societal unit, the family and its youngest members.

The Advent of Childhood

Cultures create their own constructs of reality. One of the most fundamental societal conceptualizations is that of childhood. The ideas of the child as a singular person and

1 Phillippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Richard Baldick (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), 128; Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc*, trans. John Day. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974; Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324*, Trans. Barbara Bray. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980). Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 1-10.

of childhood as a distinct stage in the life of an individual evolved very gradually over time, beginning in the Middle Ages.² This slow, incremental growth of ideas about children and childhood, however, accelerated not in the West but in the *dār al-islām* during its Classical era, approximately 132-652 A. H. /750-1258 C. E.³ Childhood as a separate, different, and special stage of life, the place of the child within the family unit, parental responsibilities toward children, and children's duties within the family all constituted important issues toward which Muslim intellectuals devoted thought and time.

The medieval Islamic world valued and invested in children. Thinkers within that tradition of civilization paid attention to children and importantly emphasized varying aspects of the child's life and development. Their work expressed emphatically their society's cultural ideals of the child and of childhood, underscoring Muslim emotion toward children and emphasizing the depth of feeling and socio-cultural capital which Islamic society invested in children and families, and with which Muslim parents surrounded their children. Islam also concomitantly gave voice to the rights and privileges with which the child was innately and divinely endowed. The traditional adage which held that wealth and children are the riches of this world resonated throughout every sector of the Muslim world.

Medieval Islamic treatises in law, theology or *kalām*, mysticism or Sūfism, and medicine all considered children in their own milieu, as beings who were specifically different from adults, with their own interests and concerns. These source materials show definitively that medieval Muslim parents perceived children in ways that diverged importantly from their European counterparts. The work of historical discovery and integration is much less advanced in the case of the Muslim child and its enviroing family, although an eminent European Islamicist in the early post-World War II era studied one aspect of child development. More recently in the very early 1990s, an Israeli scholar investigated the depth of Muslim parental emotional attachment to their children through an examination of bereavement and consolation manuals.⁴ These were

2 Other sources, especially accounts of Muslim metropolitan cities, religious law court records, deeds of waqf-foundation, for example, may provide witness to the practices pertinent to child-rearing and the support of children.

The modern notions of the child and of childhood do emerge definitively in the medieval period, for which see Sophie Oosterwijk's contribution to the collapse of Ariès's thesis entitled "The Medieval Child: An Unknown Phenomenon?" in *Misconceptions about the Middle Ages*, eds. Stephen J. Harris and Byron Lee Grigsby (New York: Routledge, 2008), 230-235. Nonetheless, there is significant information in the antique sources, especially in medical and philosophical material, to suggest that the Greeks certainly perceived the child as its own person, subject to frailties and maladies that were not observed in adults. For example, Aristotle in *History of Animals*, 588a 31-b 33 viewed babies as essentially irrational in nature. Also see, Odd M. Bakke, *When Children became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 15-22. Mark Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 5-7 explains succinctly why the Ancients held that babies were irrational from birth to the end of early childhood: before the age of seven, the person had yet to attain "reason," *logos or ratio*.

3 I have given the *hijrī* years first followed by the common era dating. Subsequently, the dates are given in the same order but without the designations.

4 Franz Rosenthal, "Child Psychology in Islam," *Islamic Culture* 26, no. 2 (1952): 1-22; Avner Gil'adi, "Infants,

composed in order to provide solace and prayerful guidance for Muslim parents who loved and lamented the loss of a child or children to death. This investigator also turned his attention to breastfeeding practices as they were recommended in the classical texts.

Modern scholarship typically has focused on the formal education of children, both religious and practical.⁵ In broad compass, we know what educational practices were approved and implemented within the Islamic context. Often, however, scholarship fails to convey any real emotional *feel* for Muslim children, for the cultural and social values with which their parents and other adults struggled to imbue them, and for the human sensibilities that so enlivened and warmed Islamic civilization in the past and which remain vital and vibrant today. This author has not found any historical studies of the child or of childhood *per se* in the pre-modern era. This scholarly *lacuna* is striking. Significant materials exist to illuminate how medieval Muslims thought about children and families; these texts, nonetheless, are mute when the task is to discover the Muslim conception of childhood. On the contrary, treatises on marriage comprise a potentially rich source of materials relating to childhood, as do expositions designed to mould character. The Muslim intellectual abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī developed a full understanding of the child and of childhood, as medieval Muslim parents experienced, as well as shaped, its contours for their children, families, and societies.

Geographical Extent of the Muslim Paradigm

Al-Ghazālī wrote his masterwork *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Revival of the Sciences of Religion*) during his first period of retreat for contemplation and spiritual regeneration which lasted eleven years, beginning when he left Baghdad in November 1095 and ending with his return to teaching at Nishapur in 1105-1106. Most likely a product of the early years of his retirement from public life, the *Ihyā'* contains several treatises which provide data for the construction of an Islamic conceptual paradigm of childhood. Source materials start with the touchstone of all speculation and law in Islām, the *Qur'ān* itself, and its prescriptions regarding children. In addition, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly with its details concerning his infancy and childhood, as well as the traditions or reports (*hadīth*) concerning what the Prophet Muhammad said and did during his governance of the first Muslim community at Medina offer further material. These initial sources

Children, and Death in Medieval Muslim Society: Some Preliminary Observations," *Social History of Medicine* 3, no. 3 (1990): 345-368; Avner Gil'adi, "Concepts of Childhood and Attitudes towards Children in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Study with Special Reference to Reaction to Infant and Child Mortality," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 32, no. 2 (1989): 121-152. See also Avner Gil'adi's article entitled "Saghīr," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edition, vol. 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

5 For example, see the comprehensive and detailed studies of George Makdisi in his *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981) and his *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

must be investigated because they formed the elemental references for the construction of the unitary cultural ethos that was universally Islamic.

The cultural and societal goals of Islam percolated widely throughout the vast expanse of territory, stretching over parts of several continents –Asia, Africa, Europe– that early Muslim rulers brought under their control. Islam ultimately spread to the Indian sub-continent, Malaysia, and Indonesia before the end of the classical period. Geographic expansion of Islam entailed the extension of a distinctly Islamic⁶ cultural ethos, although each of the diverse racial and ethnic groups, who in full or large measure embraced Islam, created their singular Muslim societies. One element of the genius of Islam that contributed to its extraordinarily swift pace of acceptance was its willingness and its ability to incorporate cultural beliefs, traits, and traditions of non-ethnically Arab peoples under the broadly inclusive umbrella of Islam. As a consequence, not only Arabs, but Persians, Africans, Turks, Indians, Chinese, and Malays –as well as many numerically smaller groups– played their part in the construction of a unitary high Islamic civilization to which all belonged, in which all participated, and to which all uniquely contributed.

Intercontinental trade brought the European and Near Eastern intellectual and cultural domains into closer connection with one another. The religious, intellectual, and medical institutions of *al-Andalus* opened other pathways through which people, ideas, practices and techniques travelled for over seven hundred years until January 1492 when Muhammad XII of Granada surrendered complete control of the Muslim-ruled kingdom of Granada to the Catholic Sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella. Despite later political and sectarian fragmentation, essential Islamic unity of viewpoint and perspective continued in arenas of primordial meaning. This was especially true in the cultural ethos surrounding the family and its most treasured members, the young.

In his *Ihyā'*, al-Ghazali notably gave voice to the concept of the child as a “blank slate.” This idea asserted that the child was neither inherently good nor intrinsically evil, and thus required instruction and guidance toward the good. Not until the early fifteenth century, did a Western European religious very faintly echo parts of the Ghazalian ideology of the child in his treatise on the care and management of the family unit.

The Elements of the Paradigm of Childhood

Together, the Qur'ān and the *hadīth* (traditions or reports) of the Prophet Muhammad's customary or habitual (*sunna*) practices constitute the first two sources or principles that have guided the formulation of law in Islam. In the Muslim context children typically are described as “the delight of our eyes.” Muslim scholars (*‘ulamā'*)

6 See Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974-1975) for the reasoning underlying his coinage and use of this term.

debated the religious virtue of marriage (*nikāh*).⁷⁷ Some maintained that the state of celibacy was preferable for the worship of God, while others stressed that marriage was superior to seclusion. The weight of scripture, the Prophetic exemplar, and the Sunna-*Hadīth* preponderated on the side of marriage. God commanded: “And marry off the single among you and those of your male and female slaves who are righteous [fit for marriage]. If they are poor, God will provide for them from His bounty: God’s bounty is infinite and He is all-knowing. Those who are unable to marry should keep chaste until God gives him enough out of His bounty.” [Q. 24:32-33.] Elsewhere, God enjoined the believers to understand the merit of marriage by reminding them that “We sent messengers before you and gave them wives and children.” [Q. 13:38.] Accordingly the Creator of the heavens and earth “made mates for you from among yourselves –and the animals too– so that you may multiply.” [Q. 42:11.]

Islam importantly recognized marriage as one of the two essential bases of human society. Both divinely instituted, the blood relationship and the marriage relationship possessed coeval significance. The Qur’an emphasized: “It is He who creates human beings from fluid, then makes them kin by blood and marriage.” [Q. 25:54.]

Marriage was understood to provide a “fortress” (*hisn*) of chastity, a spur to virtuous behavior, and a sanctified means through which satisfaction of sexual urges could be attained. “And the Prophet said: “Whoever has the means, let him get married, for it will avert the eyes and assure more relief and virtuousness,” and who does not, “let him fast for fasting to him is [a form of] castration (*wijā*).” [Bukhārī, *Sahīh* 7:3; also, 30:11.] Marriage entailed active defense of Islamic religious faith, for the Prophet said “whoever marries safeguards half of his faith, let him fear God for the second half.” Adherence to the Prophet’s example was urged upon believers; accordingly, marriage was viewed as part of the Prophetic sunna: “Marriage is of my sunna, whoever refrains from my sunna refrains from me.” [Bukhārī, *Sahīh* 67:1.]⁸

Both sources stressed the importance of procreation within the legal and spiritual foundations that marriage provided for the attainment of religious virtue, moral uplift, individual status, as well as conjugal warmth, affection, and support. Fulfillment of *dīn*, namely, the full practice of religion in every aspect of life, is accomplished through marriage. The Prophet is reported to have urged the Muslims to “marry and multiply for I will boast about you above other nations on the day of resurrection, even about the least

7 Scriptural citations directly follow the quoted Qur’anic passages.

8 These citations are given in short form immediately following the quotations in the text. Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhārī (194-256/810-870) compiled what Sunni Muslims regard as the most authentic collection of hadīth, al-Jamīc al-sahīh (The sound collection), a work more popularly known as the *Sahīh Bukhārī*. The *Sahīh* consists of over seven thousand verified or “tested” traditions which are arranged in chapters for easier use by lawyers in the process of juridical decision-making. Bukhārī’s compilation is perceived as second only to the Qur’ān in authenticity and authoritative weight.

of you.” Scripture reminded believers that God acted purposefully in establishing the institution of marriage, as well as by making it the legitimate channel of sexual desire, in this way: “People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide...” [Q. 4:1.] The emphasis placed upon procreation in marriage underscored the medieval Muslim perception of the child as the critical generational link within the family unit. The child tied the present to the past as well as to the future, for the child embodied the key to the family’s continuation as well as to its material and spiritual advancement. The Prophet’s biography offered a descriptive guide to the early care and feeding of the new born child.

Infant Care and Childrearing

Muslims understood how influential were the earliest intimate contacts of the newly born with adults. Parents at all levels of the socio-economic ladder took great pains to ensure their child’s emotional and psychological well-being over the long-term, beginning with the child’s delivery by an experienced older woman, the midwife, who then at frequent intervals checked the infant and adjusted the baby’s environmental conditions, temperature and ventilation of the room, washed, dressed, and made certain with the mother that the newborn was adequately fed. The warmth and affection of the midwife, mother, and nurse –if utilized– were closely monitored because the child’s initial experiences played a basic role in its adaptation to life outside the womb. The father petted, held, and thanked God for his child.

The care and feeding of the newborn was the father’s financial obligation even in the case of divorce. God prescribed:

Mothers shall suckle their children for two whole years, for him [the infant] who desires to complete the time of suckling. And their maintenance and their clothing must be borne by the father according to usage. No soul shall be burdened beyond its capacity. Neither shall a mother be made to suffer harm on account of her child, nor [shall] a father on account of his child; and a similar duty [devolves] on the [father’s] heir. But if both desire weaning by mutual consent and counsel, there is no blame on them. And if you wish to engage a wet-nurse for your children, there is no blame on you so long as you pay what you promised according to usage...” [Q. 2:233.]

Daughters as well as sons were valued as divine gifts and female infanticide was condemned. [Q. 42:49; Q. 16:59, 43:17, 81:8-9.]⁹

9 See Q. 4:11; *Ihyā’* II: 2, 46, lines 30-35.

Parents of a newborn benefited from instructional treatises on practical topics such as infant feeding, swaddling, methods of comforting a crying baby, and techniques of playing with the baby and making the baby coo. These advice books demonstrated the Muslim awareness of infants as unique creatures, gifts from God, who deserved special understanding and treatment. Newborns then required special protection and care. Since the infant was a blank slate (*sazājah*) whose innate nature was completely impressionable –either for good or for ill– medieval Muslims were especially mindful of the character, physical habits, and mental traits of those who would come into the most intimate contact with the infant.

A child's birth, whether male or female, occasioned happiness and hope for the parents. The Prophet cautioned the Muslims not to lament the birth of a daughter and although boys were preferred, especially for a first child, the birth of a daughter did not cause unmitigated sorrow. A child was a gift from God, not simply to its parents but to its entire extended family who anticipated the birth with delight, pleasure, and hopeful expectation. Babies were extravagantly indulged and petted by all, not just the mother and the baby's female relatives. The period of maternal indulgence ended with the birth of the next child; however, others, especially older sisters, continued to lavish affection upon younger siblings.

Patrilineally organized, all members of the Muslim extended family participated in the process of rearing the child to be *mu'addab(a)*, or "well-mannered," that is, properly socialized to Muslim cultural norms. The child's socialization took place primarily within the home and the parents bore ultimate responsibility for their children. However, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins participated in a child's rearing, acting alternatively either to provide discipline or to offer additional affection for the child. Class mattered as did urban or rural residence, where neighbors were actively engaged with the local children; in every context, Qur'anic teachers, and private tutors in the case of wealthy girls, played a role in children's maturation.

The high value placed upon children found cogent expression in the development of a normative model which articulated the cultural ideal of the value and place of the child within the family, nuclear as well as extended, succinctly explored the needs of the child, and wisely advised parents of their duties toward children and children's obligations toward their parents. Stories about the Prophet's birth, his childhood, his relationship with young members of his own family, as well as with the community's children often provided the popular medium for the transmission of the behavioral standard. The Prophetic exemplar served as a singular source, not simply of appropriate names for the newly born, but also of how they should be presented to God and to their communities, reared, and acculturated to various age-related activities, tasks, and responsibilities. Medieval Muslim parents thus possessed an awareness of the different nature and special character of the child. That consciousness originated in observation, culture-

based sensitivity, pre-Islamic customary tradition, scriptural injunction, and Prophetic example; all of these strands resonate in two texts within al-Ghazālī's body of work.

Al-Ghazālī's texts stand by themselves in providing an early and full theoretical conception of the child and childhood. They offer important data from which to reconstruct a theory of childhood as a distinct stage in the "ages of life," a period that imposed special duties upon parents. The Ghazālian texts comprise a thorough account of genuinely Muslim belief, spirit, sentiment, and practice with regard to the child. The Muslim world inherited, assimilated, elaborated, and transmitted the corpus of Hellenic theoretical and empirical knowledge. Yet al-Ghazālī's work does not merely repeat classical and post-classical Greek theories about the practical education of children. Biographies of child saints within the Sufi tradition also provide data on the special attributes that Muslims ordinarily ascribed to children. In the case of blessed children, these qualities were heightened or otherwise highlighted in marvelous ways. Nor does his text simply copy earlier Muslim models.¹⁰ The traditions of learning –non-Muslim and Muslim– which were contained in philosophical speculation, empirical observation, actual medical practice, as well as legal precedent, and religious norms all resound within the Ghazālian corpus.

The first lines of the section entitled *Bayān al-tarīq fī riḡadat al-sibyān fī auwal nushrū'ihim wa wajh ta'dibihim wa tahsīn akhlāqihim* (Clarification on the training of infant children, their education, and the improvement of their character) enunciate in tender language a developmental understanding of the infant and young child that, as is immediately evident, seems remarkably Piagetian in its observations, proscriptions, and prescriptions. Toward the beginning of the sixth Islamic/twelfth Christian century, al-Ghazālī expressed in full the modern notion of childhood as a dependent state, a condition in which the child:

... is an empty depository confided to the care of his parents, his pure soul is a precious substance, innocent, stripped bare of any inscription or image. The child's soul receives all that is written upon it; thus, his soul leans toward that to which one [parent, teacher, governess, nurse] inclines it. Habituate the child to the good, teach the child the good, and all his early infancy will be thus marked.¹¹

The Ghazālian materials lay out a system of values, a body of moral rules, and a code of conduct that demarcates the lines between ethical and unethical practices in child-rearing in the Muslim system. They permit us to reconstruct a medieval Islamic model of the child, childhood, and parental obligations. This model indicates that well before the late Middle Ages and the Humanisms of the Renaissance era, medieval Muslims

¹⁰ This text partially relies on Ibn Miskawayh's (d. 421/1030), *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq [The cultivation of morals]* which itself incorporated sections of the *Oikonomikos treatise* of Bryson of Heraclea.

¹¹ *Ihyā'* III: 2, 48, lines 13-15.

recognized the sanctity of the child, the special character of childhood, especially the earlier phases which were designated as a carefree period in which playtime was required and certain types of play were recommended, and the specific stages and the education that was appropriate to each period within infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Muslims also emphasized the unique opportunities that proper child-rearing practices offered to parents in their quest to attain eternal salvation.

Medieval Muslim parents valued their children but not simply for the pleasure and entertainment that they could derive from the antics of their offspring, or for the future aid which good children might render to parents. Medieval Muslim *abā* and *ummāt* were distinctly attentive and devoted, for they saw that children were fragile creatures of God who needed both to be safeguarded and perfected. An observant parent himself, al-Ghazālī recognized that before parents could attempt to guide their children's behavior, they first had to understand it. The wisdom of his fundamental insight is strikingly modern!

According to Ghazalian teaching, the child is neither an adult in miniature nor is he someone simply to be petted and cuddled, without regard either to his needs or to his intrinsic nature as human. Although the child is inherently noble, by his God-given nature, the newly born and young infant is neither naturally good, nor is he naturally bad. The child is simply innocent. Thus, at his birth, his mind is a clean slate on which parents and those others who play a role in his rearing may write whatever they please. The child is unique; and, parental recognition of the special qualities of the child influenced the care and affection given to the child, male especially; but, female children also received their parents' concern and love. Muslim parents exhibited love, affection, and emotional attachment to their daughters as well as to their sons, although seemingly to a somewhat lesser degree. Scripture and Prophetic example strictly admonished Muslims against female infanticide and urged similar treatment of the children of both genders in terms of cuddling and other displays of physical affection toward infants and young children.¹²

Gender differentiation in terms of treatment began at the age when small responsibilities were allotted to children. The tasks of acculturation and socialization by gender were seen by Muslim parents as part of their roles as good parents; most met the expectations of their families, neighborhoods, and wider social networks. Little girls participated in tasks around the home, including those related to babies; by contrast, boys ran errands, tended to animals, or did chores in the father's shop or on the family farm. It is to be noted, however, that both young boys and young girls were expected to know how to take basic care of infants, and both were expected to be responsible for the well-being of younger members of the family and the larger kin-group. By approxi-

¹² Q.16:59, 43:17, and 81:8-9 condemn female infanticide, a proscription not found in the Christian scriptural text.

mately seven years of age, gender sorting out in terms of responsibilities and freedoms became a more seriously pursued task among parents and other adult relatives. The Prophet Muhammad traditionally urged Muslims to “be gentle to your children the first seven years and in the following seven be firm.” By that time, boys went regularly to the mosque and girls covered their hair.

Intellectual Development

As a child grew, person-hood evolved through several stages, each of which was characterized by the emergence of a specific faculty. As al-Ghazālī described the child’s development, sensation emerged first and after birth, the child possessed the ability to receive information brought in by the five physical senses. These sensory abilities did not emerge all together at once, but instead in closely joined phases. The sense of touch appeared first in the child followed by sight, hearing, taste, and finally, speech; naturally, the nursing infant’s “speech” did not qualify as “articulated and well-ordered” speech. Second, the child’s faculty of imagination (*al-wahm*) came forth. Imagination is “the recorder of the information conveyed by the senses...” and “it is not found in the infant at the beginning of its evolution.” Clearly an experienced parent, al-Ghazālī further explained that “this is why an infant wants to get hold of an object when he sees it, yet forgets about this object when it is out of his sight. No conflict of desire arises in his soul for something out of sight until he gets a little older, when he begins to cry for it, because its image is still with him, preserved in his imagination.”¹³ Sometime between the ages of five to seven, the child received the third faculty of reason or discernment. Reason or intellect (*al-‘aql*) allowed the child to “apprehend ideas beyond the spheres of sense and imagination. Intellect is the specifically human faculty, [and] it is not found in the lower animals nor yet in infants and toddlers,” for its emergence constitutes a fresh stage in the child’s development. Reason permits the child to distinguish the good from the bad, the obviously true from the obviously false, and so forth.¹⁴

The fourth faculty of discursive reason began to appear gradually during mid-adolescence. According to al-Ghazālī, the young person now comes to possess the ability to “take the data of pure reason and combine them, arrange them as premises, and deduce from them informing knowledge. [The pre-teen] thus may take, for example, two conclusions thus learned, combine them again, and learn a fresh conclusion.” The individual then may go on multiplying knowledge (acquired) in this way *ad infinitum*. This fourth faculty of discursive reasoning in the *Munqidh min addalāl* [The deliverer

¹³ *Mishkāt*, 76, lines 11–20.

¹⁴ *Mishkāt*, 77, lines 6–8. *Munqidh*, 41, lines 6 ff. to which the *Mishkāt* passages should be compared. See Bargerón 2003: 32–78.

from error] is labelled *al-‘aql* while the faculty enumerated as the third is simply called “the power of distinguishing or differentiating,” that is, *al-tamyīz*.¹⁵

Parental Obligations

Parents must adapt their attempts to influence or incline their child’s behavior to the specific stage of human development that the child’s actions suggest. Small children wish to imitate the behaviors they see around them. Responsible parents shouldered this responsibility to influence their child’s behavior by adjusting the modalities of their instruction to their child’s stage of development. Muslim parents built upon this knowledge of children’s desire to model adult behavior; occasionally, little girls were allowed to wear a head scarf and little boys were permitted to accompany the men to the mosque, field, grove, or shop. Guidance of children’s behavior and their socialization to the normative standards of the community constituted elemental child-rearing duties incumbent upon parents.

A recurrent motif in al-Ghazālī’s discussion emphasizes parental obligations toward their children. We already have seen how all members of the family were called upon to play their own part in the rearing of children. The early learning process stressed orality and largely appealed to senses and emotions because as al-Ghazālī maintained young children learned through the senses. Direct participation of the family in the teaching and learning experiences of the very young encompassed a broad conception of learning which included playtime as well as the modelling of adult behavior in terms of gestures, speech, story-telling, games, and at the appropriate age, literacy.

Honed through observation, adult knowledge of developmental child psychology also served as the foundation of effective teaching once instruction passed into the hands of the professional teacher, as al-Ghazālī emphasized. In addition to entering upon a new stage of intellectual life with the dawning of the ability to reason, the child between five and seven years of age also develops the capacity to feel shame (*haya*). Emotional maturation becomes a process when the child’s capacity to be ashamed of an action that he or she has performed or of a thought that has occurred to him or her first emerges. According to al-Ghazālī, shame is that emotion which the child displays when blushing and when hanging one’s head low over non-commendable actions.

Well prior to the child gaining the ability to reason, Muslim parents were urged to initiate habituation of the child towards the good. Al-Ghazali explained how this process could begin with very young children. Parents and older members of the family, including siblings, could assist in this process of good habit development. The little child’s inclination towards the good can be stimulated by having him or her simply imitate

¹⁵ *Mishkāt*, 77, lines 9-13; *Munqidh*, 41, lines 10-13.

kindness towards animate beings, other people and animals, or by having the small girl or boy copy charity towards the unfortunate and the poor, by allowing the child to extend a coin to a beggar.¹⁶ At this point, the child cannot reflect upon or think about why the performance of good deeds is important, both for the individual as well as for society; all that the child can do is model the appropriate behavior. By contrast, the advent of shame and guilt signals the emergence within the child of a new-found capacity to understand the moral qualities of actions and to adjust his conduct to virtuous patterns of behavior.

Far from emphasizing the role of *haya'* in order to develop neurotic and guilt-ridden children, shame (*haya'*) functioned positively in the effort to rear the "good citizen" of the ideal Islamic community. One of the oldest and most enduring of Muslim ethical and religious precepts stipulates that each Muslim is personally obligated before God to "command the right and to forbid the wrong." Institutionalized as public ostracism, shame then functioned in at least two ways: the virtuous reminded back-sliders of their duty to behave according to the Islamic code of ethics, while the recalcitrant were at least minimally persuaded to restrain their tendencies towards evil-doing in the hope of avoiding socio-religious and cultural guilt for their bad actions.

Al-Ghazālī encouraged developing the emotion of shame into an "unerring conscience," which required protection against all such vicious influences that might damage it.¹⁷ For this reason, al-Ghazālī strongly condemned all authoritarian and coercive methods of making children learn through physical abuse, corporal punishment, force and threat, pain and fear. With equal vigor, al-Ghazālī also proscribed pedantic exhortations on the part of parents and teachers. What he was condemning, of course, is the universal parental anthem of "do as I say, and not as I do."

Ghazālīan theorizing about children reminds us that the basic fact about young children is that they learn by persuasion and not by rational demonstration. According to him, children imitate what appeals to their imagination rather than to their reason. Children are fond of fairy-tales and fanciful stories; thus, by making thoughtful and judicious comments on these tales and stories, parents and teachers may communicate the basic knowledge of good and evil to their children and to their students. Parents are advised even to use poetry and song in order to soften children's hearts and refine their imaginations. In practical terms, parents are advised that they must always praise children for whatever little bit of good that they do. Praise will serve as recognition for children and will save them from suffering humiliation at being ignored. Praise, moreover, helps children to build a strong moral conscience on the basis of the natural emotion of shame.

16 *Ihyā'*, III: 2, 49, lines 15-19. Habituation of the child to the normative expectations and standards of the community was the chief focus of parents in Greco-Roman and Christian Antiquity. Unlike in classical Antiquity and differing from Islam, Christian writers, for example, Augustine, were deeply aware of the heavy impress of original sin upon the innate character or nature of the child. See, Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.8.

17 *Ihyā'*, III: 2, 54, lines 21-24.

Al-Ghazālī's teaching advised that children must be praised generally, but reprovved or reprimanded only sparingly. When children conceal little misdeeds, they should not be exposed to the disgrace of being detected or "found out." Even when censure seems unavoidable, reproof must be always indirect and benevolent. Correction, al-Ghazālī said, may be carried out first by attributing the lapse on their part to oversight or ignorance, and then second, by warning the child not to repeat the act. Open and violent censure, as far as possible, must be avoided, "for it only helps to destroy children's candor, inducing them to duplicity and hypocrisy, and turning them into impudent rebels."¹⁸

When physical punishment becomes inevitable, al-Ghazālī urged that such correction be administered in privacy. Under the condition of privacy, children may take corporal punishment to be a natural and logical consequence of the behavioral lapses on their part. Privacy, however, never provided concealment for adult excess in dispensing bodily punishment. Parents and teachers must never administer more than three whacks of the cane and then never to the face or to the head. The humiliation of publicly given corporal punishment results in disgrace and public humiliation leads only, he tells us, to the extinction of the innate sense of shame.¹⁹

Conclusion

Several centuries before their counterparts in the West, medieval Muslims emphatically voiced the ideas of the child as a separate and special individual and of childhood as a distinct stage of life. The singular quality and character of the child demanded of both parents that they devote serious and careful attention to child rearing within the family, including the obligation to give a child an appropriate name and not one that would expose him or her to ridicule and scorn. A cultural and religious ethic sanctioned procreation within the context of marriage and provided guidelines for the spouses and potential parents.

Medieval Muslims prepared for the conception, growth of the fetus, and arrival of the new person; pregnancy, birth, the "welcoming" of the child, the naming, all followed the formal and customary rules of the diverse Islamicate. The rearing and preparation of the child through the pre-adult stages of life to become a good citizen of the Muslim community demonstrated norms of behavior, socialization, and relational patterns that were not identical but similar throughout the geographically, racially, ethnically, and linguistically disparate communities that constituted the living world civilization of Islam in the Middle Ages. From one corner of the Islamicate at its peak to the other, Muslims understood the intrinsic significance of children and manifested that consciousness of children as different and separate from adults in every aspect of being.

¹⁸ *Ihyā'*, II: 2, 46, lines 1-5; *Ihyā'*, III: 2, 54, lines 26-29.

¹⁹ *Ihyā'*, III: 2, 54, lines 30-33, 55, lines 1-3.

Cardinal ideas about the nature of the child, the unique character of childhood, and the special requirements of proper child-rearing and instruction bloomed first in the medieval Muslim world of Classical era. Many of these concepts and practices made their way across the eastern Mediterranean basin to Christian Europe through a variety of channels. Nonetheless, the distinctly modern insights into the intrinsic character of the child and the special quality of childhood that Muslim thinkers, specifically al-Ghazali, articulated moved into the Western consciousness only at glacial speed.

Medieval Muslim mothers and fathers revered the child and recognized the unique responsibilities and opportunities that parenthood bestowed upon them. Loving parents attempted to model the particular devotion to children that scriptural injunction and Prophetic example enjoined. In the medieval Islamic world, whether born to high status or into a more lowly one, children were wanted, welcomed, and valued as a divine gift and a sacred trust. Qur'anic injunction stipulated fair and equitable treatment for children, including wards, urged charity and kindness toward orphans, and mandated a minimal level of education as a duty incumbent upon parents to fulfill to the extent of their capacities. Al-Ghazali articulated that "special devotion" in *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*:

Parents are responsible for looking after their children properly. To their hands the innocent child is confided with a pure conscience and stainless soul. His heart, resembling a mirror, is ready to reflect anything put before it, and he imitates carefully whatever he watches. He may be an ideal citizen if he is educated well; and he may be a harmful person if he is ill-trained or neglected. His parents, relatives, as well as teachers will share with him his happiness or suffer from his being evil. So, it is the duty of parents or guardian to pay full attention to the child. Teach him good behavior, edify him and keep him away from bad company.

The child must be accustomed to a spare and hard life, and not luxury. Self-respect, modesty and sincerity must be among his outstanding qualities. The child should not be encouraged to be fond of money or material things, as this is the first step toward useless quarrels.

When the child is grown up, he is due to be handed over to an excellent and good instructor to teach him useful and necessary learning, and to lead him by the right way to the right end.²⁰

His words and the ethic of the child that they represented remain as soundly emblematic of good parenting in the twenty first century as they did toward the beginning of the sixth Islamic century, the twelfth century CE.

²⁰ *Ihyā'* III: 2, 56, lines 5-15.

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