

Cultural constructions of childhood

Business



This essay investigates the literature on religion as a dominant force in cultural constructions. In particular, it establishes different ways in which these cultural constructions defined childhood before the 19th century. According to the literature available, religion has significantly modeled childhood in the Puritan, as well as Sunday Moralism Contexts for time immemorial. Puritans encompassed a group of English Protestants who were retrained from bringing changes to the established church from within. However, their religious principles still find their way to different parts of the world.

Conversely, Sunday Moralists belonged to the mainstream church and had a range of cultures that conformed with the practices of established church (Fordpage 29). The human perception of childhood has significantly changed over time. During the Middle Age, the Western society looked at their children as miniature versions of the adult population. This is perfectly depicted in the artistic works of the 15th and 16th centuries where they basically appeared as shrunken replicas of their fathers or mothers in the family portraits. Besides, these portraits depict their attire-body proportion to be of similar to that of their adult parents.

In light of these depictions, it's understandable that the society expected these children to act responsibly like their adult counterparts. According to the literature available, children had a social responsibility to actively participate in all spheres of life that their parents participated in. As such, their parents had no moral restrictions to avoid the use of foul language or sexual connotations in their parents. These ideals thrived mostly because the notion that kids need parental guidance and special treatment did not

exist in the Western society. In fact, they were often exposed to severe punitive measures for simple social transgressions just like the adult populations (Sherwood page 67). These trends changed drastically in the sixteenth century when the society started to look at children from the perspective of social inheritance.

However, this new development did not match the current trends where children are accorded a very special place in the society. According to the literature available, the radical change that occurred in the 16th century arose mainly from the demographic reality in the Middle Age that was marked with fatal diseases and extremely high mortality rates. This implied that children could not live long enough as had been the case before the emergence of these fatal diseases. For instance, the statistics obtained from France indicate that more than 40% of infants in the country died within their first year of life. Although this brought a significant sense of attachment between parents and children, parents opted to cushion themselves from emotional tragedy by avoiding emotional attachment until the child was old enough to survive.

In fact, it was common for parents to have their children buried anywhere on the family premises like other family pets (Ford page 46). However, it was in the 18th century that religion took toll of cultural constructions as related to childhood. This idea was not only widely adopted by the mainstream church, but also by the protestant groups as the best way to bring up morally upright kids. The related moral teachings were imparted on the children in different ways, including setting good examples for them to emulate and telling them fairy tales with moral lessons. For instance, John Cotton's publication "Milk <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-constructions-of-childhood/>

for Babes” particularly targeted children and young Christians with a view to modeling their behavior.

Basically, the book had 64 questions and answers that ideally summarized issues pertaining to sin and law, role of the Church in the society and the Ten Commandments. According to literature, each question in the book had up to eight Scriptural references that certainly helped young Christians read and understand the bible better. Besides, the book dwelt widely on salvation and the last judgment, thereby awakening young people to the fact that God will finally judge them for all their actions on Earth. As such, the book did not only offer life’s practical lessons to young people, but modeled them into Christians with perfect understanding of the bible (Cotton page 11). The Puritan text, “ Milk for Babes” by John Cotton also emphasizes on good morals for Christian children.

According to him, there are a lot of pleasant things in store for the obedient and those who love God. For instance, he promises that such people would drink abundantly from Heavenly streams once they ascend up at God’s right hand. Besides, John Cotton attempts to assure Christian that they should not shy away from seeking Christ as He would not reject them. These sentiments typically intend to persuade young people to accept salvation and enjoy the comfort of their youth in Christianity (Ford page 91). In addition, the story puts emphasis on the need to remain faithful even in times of trials.

According to Cotton, children must learn to separate the actions of Satan in their lives from those of Christ. For instance, the text portrays Satan as the source of all the unnecessary sufferings. However, he stresses that Christian

children must not give up their power to persevere because Christ would finally triumph over Satan and deliver them from their evil sufferings. Ideally, this tends to prepare Christian children to the challenges that are associated with a Christian life (Cotton page 51). The story in “Fairchild Family” by Mary Martha Sherwood exemplifies a typical Sunday School Moralistic text.

Essentially, the story depicts a family consumed in a social struggle for Christian holiness. According to the story, Fairchild parents have a responsibility to teach their three children about character and human behavior that are acceptable in Heaven. Besides, it teaches these Christian kids about the kind of earthly morals that would enable them to live harmoniously with their colleagues and friends. In fact, the text goes ahead to enumerate the traits that the Christian faith regards as immoral. For instance, disobedience and greed are listed as some of the heinous sins that children would commit before their parents. This implied that Fairchild parents advocated for absolute respect and obedience from Christian children.

Further, the text provides a guideline on how children should relate amongst themselves. This is perfectly depicted by enumerating envy and fighting as immoral behavior before the society and the Church. Although this could have a broader meaning, it certainly implied that Christian children would live quite peacefully and grow into responsible adults by learning at an early age not to engage in physical fights with their colleagues. Besides, they would avoid temptations into theft or adultery by not envying other people's property or other people's wives (Sherwood page 122). The book “Fairchild Family” by Mary Sherman also entails a story of the demise of two

neighborhood children. The story was particularly intended to prepare Christian children for salvation by showing them the consequences of declining to get saved.

According to this tale, people who die with true and faithful hearts experience comfort even at their deathbed, as happened to Charles. However, those who die before they receive salvation experience severe suffering due to their hard hearts. This is perfectly exemplified by the disobedient Augusta who ends up burning himself up with the little fire he was playing with. Although this only gives a glimpse of the eventual experience, the story gives an impression that people who do not accept Christ are certainly damned. Accordingly, such a story would convince Christian children that the world and life in general is only safe for people who are close to their God. As such, they would not hesitate to get into serious Christianity and receive salvation (Sherwood page 52).

Mary Sherman makes it appear as though salvation eventually enables Christian children recognize and correct their mistakes. According to her, such children receive a completely new divine nature that prevents them from the influence of the devil and enables them to desist from sinful activities. Conversely, Part III of the story outlines different kinds of social virtues that children should adopt as they grow up into adulthood. For instance, it emphasizes on the need to help the poor and respect humanity regardless of their social status. Besides, the story insists on respect for elderly persons as the only way to attract favors from God. Further, it conspicuously appears in Part III of the story that Christianity is against

sibling rivalry when the children were taken to Gibbet to view rotting corpses that died because of such rivalry.

Essentially, exposing children to such a scene would enable them to desist from violent behavior (Sherwood page 34). In conclusion, religion was a dominant force in cultural construction in childhood before the 19th century. This is why several myths were created and century-long legends resurfaced in order to provide moral lessons through real life stories. For instance, the fairy tale of “ Milk for Babes” was widely exploited to emphasize the value of generosity and selfless service to humanity among children. Besides, the tale perfectly depicted the challenges that children without proper social identity face in their attempts to attain acceptance.

Furthermore, the story of “ Fairchild Family” elucidates the idea of fate and that nothing can take away people’s good fortunes. As such, these tales ideally enable children to instill the best Christian morals in their lives by learning to respect their parents and the people around them without looking at their social backgrounds (Ford page 121).