

Trinity College Cambridge

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FROM (BEFORE THE) CRADLE TO (AFTER THE) GRAVE

Raising and Nurturing

Birth: Once or Twice

Jeremiah 1, 4–8 John 3, 31–35

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What are children and what are they for?

Those may seem very odd questions. At least they are not questions which we seem very regularly and consciously to ask. But ask those questions we surely should, because if we don't ask the questions quite consciously, we nonetheless answer them in effect, in the countless, various and probably competing notions of what a child is and is for, which we propose in their schooling, in patterns of family socialization and upbringing, and perhaps especially in the relentless advertising and disparate social media which picture children to us. Even when we don't ask these questions, we still answer them – only then not very reflectively, possibly somewhat uncritically or even thoughtlessly, with the risk of all sorts of confusions about children.

And we do seem remarkably confused about children. Within our society, to speak no more widely, the child is a highly ambiguous thing. Some will go to great extremes to conceive a child as if their lives would be bereft without children; others will go to extremes to be rid of them, as if their lives would be wrecked if they had one. Or, to mention something else, children are icons of innocence and wonder, and yet, as we know, ever younger children – I really mean girls, of course – are sexualised to an astonishing degree with clothes and make up borrowed from an adult and a far from innocent world. There again, whereas children are cosseted and cared for and removed from the world of work in a way which would have astonished people of even 125 years ago, they are at one and the same time nonetheless placed in a system of education which seems ever more geared to serving as a production line for the specific, narrow and utilitarian demands of our economy. Not much time for wonder even in primary school when there are exams to pass and key stage milestones to attain.

Do we know what children are? And what they are for? Our implicit answers seem somewhat confused – and at least, there are tensions between them. So, how did we reach this point – and can we do any better?

Let's go back a bit. The celebrated historian Philippe Ariès famously and controversially claimed (or possibly didn't), that childhood was invented, or discovered, no earlier than the late 13th century. What he meant, if he meant it, was that it was only in the 13th century that childhood was identified as a stage of life importantly distinct from other stages; previously, he suggests, children had been just rather small adults.

Now, like many another daring and dashing intellectual thesis, this one moderated under scholarly scrutiny, in this case to the still important point that 'childhood has a history'.¹ There have been, and indeed are, many and diverse ways of being a child. Different times and places and cultural circumstances figure and fashion children quite differently – and a recent study of *The Anthropology of Childhood* indicates something of the range of the most popular and remarkably different scripts for producing children with its subtitle: *Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*.²

I will leave the changelings to one side, but this book and others have a very neat story to tell about children as chattels and as cherubs, and it goes like something like this. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, in America especially, but then in Europe, a great shift occurred with the invention of the economically 'worthless', but 'emotionally priceless' child. For a host of reasons, children were no longer needed and ceased to be valued for their labour, but now could be valued as an 'emotional and affective asset'. A child was treasured for his or her 'sentimental worth', 'for their contribution to parents' emotional well-being rather than to their material comfort'.³ It is this child, the child as an essential component in an emotionally and sentimentally satisfying form of life in the family, which we moderns have invented and shaped, so the story goes, and to which we have given such cultural significance and value – turning our little chattels into little cherubs on whom we lavish extravagant attention.

Well, it's a good story as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough – either far enough back, or far enough forwards. It doesn't go far enough back to notice a crucial change which occurred before the 19th century, and it doesn't go far enough forwards to draw attention to the strains and tensions in the 'children as cherubs notion', for in all sorts of ways our children are now not just cherubs, but also – and here the children as cherubs story starts to creak – fledgling consumers, workers in training, even budding sex objects, and so on. So if we go further on with the story we will find these puzzles and tension; and maybe, so I suggest, we have to go a bit further back to see why we lost the plot.

So, let's go back – happily not all the way back to the 13th century, but back behind the mid-Victorian cult of the child another 100 years, to the mid-18th century, and to the influential imaginings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

¹ P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (London, 1979). The thought that Ariès may not have claimed this, and that what he showed is that 'childhood has a history', is made by H. Cunningham, 'Histories of Childhood', *The American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), 1197.

² D. Lancy, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (Cambridge, 2008).

³ Lancy, *The Anthropology of Childhood*, 110, following V. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York, 1985).

Now, it was Rousseau who gave us the idea of the noble savage – founded on the notion that society and culture corrupt an original natural innocence. (Thus, for example, he pointed to the admirable sexual moderation of the Caribbeans, all the more admirable given that they live in a hot climate, which, as he tells us, ‘always seems to inflame the passions’.) But of course very small noble savage could be found much closer to home in children, for they too were born uncorrupted by so-called civilization. Rousseau’s equation went two ways – if children were noble savages, savages were, of course, to be treated as children, but that’s another story. All we need to notice now is that the credit or otherwise for popularizing the idea of children as cherubic, as possessed of an inner and original goodness, threatened from the outside, so to speak, belongs to Rousseau.

It comes as no surprise then that the generation after Rousseau turned against the very rite, baptism, which was taken to express a quite contrary doctrine of the child. Nothing in Christianity offended late Enlightenment and early Romantic sensibilities quite as much as did the idea of original sin. So it was that, ‘At the time of the French Revolution, and particularly during the Thermidor period, an attempt was made by the “enlightened” elite to establish birth ceremonies entirely devoid of any reference to original sin, and structured as rites of acceptance of the infant within the “national community” and the family.’⁴ It may be, by the way, that David Beckham was looking for a service of this kind when he told the press that he and Victoria certainly wanted Brooklyn christened, but they were not sure just yet into which religion.

Now Rousseau’s heirs were, of course, right to turn against the rite of baptism just in the sense that that baptism really does stand firmly between the 18th century and the child of late modernity. Baptism has no truck with the construction of the child as an innocent cherub or noble savage. Baptism sees children differently – and sees them in two perspectives. And to put this Christian perspective on children seemingly paradoxically, we might say that baptism combines a very low view of children, and a very high view of children. A low view of their natural capacity, if you like; a very high view of what they are called to be. A low view of the child who is born, but an exalted view of the child who is born again.

Let me start with the low view since it is the low view which caused the feeling against baptism amongst the philosophes. The bit that shocked those Enlightenment and Romantic figures was of course, that baptism is, very obviously, a washing – and you don’t wash what is clean. The Book of Common Prayer service opens uncompromisingly with the words ‘Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin . . .’ Modern versions have softened this a bit – I am not familiar with all of the Church of England’s more modern, chatty services, but I am pretty sure I remember one which begins with the minister saying something like – ‘you know, kids can be little scamps sometimes!’ Anyway, the baptism rite, in its older form, doesn’t have any time for the idea that children are cherubs, or little angels, or any such thing.

⁴ G. Alfani and V. Gourdon, eds., *Spiritual Kinship in Europe, 1500–1900* (London, 2012), ‘Introduction’, 28.

Having said that, however, the service goes on to take a very high view of what children are for and what they are called to. For here, in the baptism service, after the child has been washed, the solemn and final instructions – indeed the only instructions – to the child’s godparents are that ‘ye shall provide, that he may learn the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue’ – the solemnity of these instructions underlined by their immediate repetition with the stricture that the child be brought to the Bishop for confirmation ‘so soon as he can say the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue’.

This all sounds a bit prosaic to you perhaps, since reciting the Lord’s Prayer and the ten commandments, whether in the vulgar tongue or another, doesn’t stir your imaginations. But just think what is being said and not said.

If I had time I would take a detour to our Old Testament lesson via the day of Pentecost, for it is the narrative of salvation history represented in those two stories which is contained in those seemingly prosaic instructions at Baptism. Jeremiah is a great prophet chosen by God. ‘Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew you’ says the Lord – and ‘before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee, and ordained thee a prophet unto the nations . . . Behold I have put my word in thy mouth. I have set thee over nations and kingdoms.’ What Christians believed about Pentecost, if I can put it in brief, is just that this sublime prophetic vocation, now falls on each and every member of the people of God. On the day of Pentecost, Peter stands up and announces the fulfilment of the words of another prophet, Joel – ‘It shall come to pass, says the Lord, that I shall pour out my spirit upon all flesh , and your sons and daughter shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions . . . and on my servants and handmaids I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy.’

Think about it – what those baptismal instructions signify – setting confirmation as the goal and purpose of the child’s upbringing – is that the each and every child, whether male or female, is first of all, to put it in other terms, a spiritual or moral being, worthy of education in relation to this aspect of their being. Of all the things that might be said about children, of all the ends you might set before them, or all the socially prescribed destinies proposed to and for children – this rite picks the most lofty imaginable, charging the godparents with turning the child towards the word of God.

What does this low view and this high view add up to? Just because children are not naturally cherubs, their moral and spiritual well-being and growth is no more to be taken for granted than is their physical well-being and growth. Both will depend upon their being guided, nurtured and protected. Sentimentalism about children is excluded – especially a sentimentalism, such as the child as cherub notion, which takes away the imperative to guide, nurture and protect them, as children if could get by by themselves. But whilst taking away sentimentalism, the high view of the destiny of children also precludes any complacent aiming low for children and contests the construction and co-option of children in the diminished and demeaning roles which our culture proposes for them.

I said a while back that our contemporary conceptions of children are shaped by patterns of schooling, by relentless advertising, by pop culture and so on – and, of course, by our modern day unofficial rites of initiation and rites of passage. How are children conceived and imagined here – what are children told to be? Workers perhaps – consumers to be sure – if they are girls, they are schooled in the demands of being satisfactory objects for the male gaze. And so on. In the rite of baptism, however, Christianity imagines a different narrative. It declares that children are children of God, and that that vocation trumps any other construction of them – it precludes their being used as chattels as much as it prohibits our taking it for granted that they are, quite naturally, cherubs.

Ariès thought that children were once only small adults. Christianity believes, I think, that adults are only big children. Each of us is addressed by the word of God. Each of us is spoken to by this word and each of us is called to speak. This is the most important thing about us. Spoken to by this word, and speaking it, we are, like Jeremiah, set over nations and kingdoms, that we should not be mastered by them, but ourselves be masters over all that they propose to us. How different the lives of all children would be, big and small, if we lived by this gospel.