

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Western Christendom witnessed a new and considerable interest in the category of childhood. The literatures discussed above are by no means the only writings to seek to define the idea and importance of the child. Nonetheless, they contain the most extensive discussions of the matter in the central Middle Ages. All four discourses maintain a rigid distinction between childhood and adulthood. The dichotomy between vulnerable, innocent children and adults who are potentially harmful or loving (or both) is endlessly reinforced for a variety of reasons, the most important of which is to define a naturalized, proper, and pious concept of child rearing. Writers privileged childhood as a unique period that, while often valorized and always problematized, was threatened by its own transience—that is, by the inevitable transition from childhood to adulthood for those who survived and by the possibility of death for all children. Because of his inherent fragility, the child needed protection from eternal damnation, from death precipitated by toxic blood or milk, from cold and hunger, from the child's own foolhardiness, or from the deceit of adults. Children came to be seen as representatives and inheritors of the best and worst traits of humanity. By invoking paradoxical images of the child as pure and sinful or faithless and devout, the discourses reinforced the importance of family and proper child rearing.

Concepts of the child expressed in the different literatures of the twelfth and thirteenth century were often contradictory. Even so, the theme that connects them is the idea of childhood's extreme fragility. Taken together, the texts vividly documented one consequence of that fragility: Adults exhibited an almost obsessive concern for and high degree of emotion about children. The maternal anxiety that was expressed in so many texts coupled a sense of fear for the child's safety with an explicit declaration of parental love. While these expressions of emotion provide evidence of twelfth- and thirteenth-century interest and investment in children (an important but not novel observation in the historiography of medieval childhood), the discourses treated questions far broader than simply those surrounding the emotive impact of childhood. Contemporary sources mentioned the theme of endangerment and children, but most—for example, the story of Peter of Courtenay and the child buried in the bishop's bedchamber, with which this book began—included only passing references to childhood and provided few details. In contrast, the four literatures

studied here dwelt on the nature of childhood and on a variety of perceived threats to children.¹ The writings specified particular moments when concepts and emotions surrounding childhood took on a significant role in medieval society, indicating when, where, why, and how the child mattered. Although they do not directly reinforce one another, the discourses all begin from the same premise—namely, that the child was weak and threatened by some outside force, which was associated with a different social group in each discourse. Ideological forces seemingly unrelated to the history of childhood—such as opposition to heresy, anti-Judaism, and medical concerns over women's bodies—provided settings that created or exposed some of the extensive threats children faced.

All of the texts, not only the medical writings, emphasized the physicality of the child. Even the baptismal debates, although prioritizing the spiritual aspects of the child's life, analyzed the corporeal existence of the child, taking up both the physical consequences of sin—the inability to walk, reason, or believe—and the physiologically based spiritual punishment awaiting the unbaptized child in hell, the lack of a vision of God.² The writings on ritual murder and the Children's Crusade also revolved around the child's physical weaknesses, although both discourses focused on the intellectual and moral aspects of childhood. Narratives of ritual murder interpreted positively the child's fragility—death as martyrdom—while the tales of the crusade underscored the children's failure by invoking the youths' simpleminded pride, betrayal, and foolishness.

The physical frailty of the child, founded on the fear of mortality, reflected a larger medieval concept of childhood as a metaphor for incompleteness. The child needed adults to achieve wholeness or completion, whether through fetal sustenance in order to survive or through baptismal sponsorship in order to join the Christian community. The debate over the baptism of infants most clearly demonstrated the concern over children's inadequacies. Without the sponsor's faith, the child risked death and thus permanent separation or fragmentation from the Christian community (like the uncircumcised child under the Old Law, the unbaptized infant would be "lost to his people"), leading to the loneliness and eternal incompleteness of the child's existence at the fringe of hell, an area that scholastics would soon christen the limbo of children. The child's physical and moral incompleteness on Earth could lead not only to terrestrial pain and death but also to spiritual damnation.

These arguments were based first and foremost on the flawed nature of the child. However, the discourses did not simply describe the child as spiritually, physically, and mentally weak. They also discussed the origins and repercussions of such weaknesses, often attributed to the actions of adults. Unlike children,

adults could exercise self-control and therefore could be held accountable for their treatment of children. The child's irresponsibility and inability to defend himself implied and demanded a need for adult responsibility. Consequently, the child became the occasion for an ethical battle over adult behavior. Positive images of child rearing—such as doctors' demands for the mother's regimen and images of Jesus' and the Virgin's protective love of children—clashed with negative images of parental irresponsibility, patriarchal Jewish violence, women's lack of control of their bodies, and adult deceit. In response, the texts advocated and defined a sense of familial, medical, and religious orthodoxy in the rearing of children.

Despite their demands for correct adult behavior, writers noted that even properly parented children were still endangered. References to the frequency of child mortality underlay and authenticated the fears of external threats. While the child often appeared as a danger to himself, it was a foreign menace that was depicted as exploiting or heightening the possibility of the child's death. In this sense, the texts sought to explain the death of children, to place the blame elsewhere, especially on suspect social groups. Early in the life cycle, the focus on physical danger dealt with those closest to the child, particularly women and parents. Baptismal literature concentrated on (god)parental responsibility, while medical literature added the theme of the mother's control of her own body and that of her child. The sources for the final three chapters, dealing with later phases in the process of maturation, suggested more-distant threats: heretics, Jews, and a variety of foreign enemies. In all of these discourses, contact with humanity was represented as necessary but potentially harmful to the child. Behind that assumption lay a deep pessimism about human nature and a fear of physical and moral corruption. However, that pessimism was paralleled by and found its antidote in a sense of optimism concerning proper child rearing, also described and defined in these discourses.

By suggesting that adults caused the difficulties and deaths of children, writers attempted to displace the problems of childhood onto adults. Yet the same texts simultaneously effected another displacement, the transference to the child of adult concerns over social, religious, and gender categories. In this sense, childhood became a site of struggle over important contemporary issues. The concept of the child, already problematic, was problematized further by the role of adults in the child's life. The writings centered on the interaction of adult and child, an interaction in which the adult could either assist and protect the child or help to destroy him. Without positive adult interference, the fetus and newborn could not eat on their own, the infant could not have faith or baptize himself, and the child could not distinguish deceit or avoid corruption. The texts often represented adult-child interactions as negative and deleterious to the children,

thereby leading to mistrust of the adults involved. These sources articulated a tension between optimism and pessimism, between proper, loving care for children and an unacceptable, irresponsible treatment of the young. The focus of these writings was on adult actions, mature humans' choice of good or evil. Just as the child was perceived to be a danger to himself, even more so could the adult pose a threat to the child's existence. In response, writers argued that adults must fulfill God's mission toward the young by adhering to correct biological, moral, and pedagogical roles.

Although many of the sources used here were written in Latin for a learned clerical audience, they concentrated on important issues for the laity's rearing of the young and so suggested a wider secondary audience to whom these ideals could be distilled. The central mystery of this literature lies in the disjunction between the familial anxiety over parental behavior that motivated the literature and the childless social group that produced and read it. With the exception of the Old French text explicitly written for lay use, the medical literature was read by doctors and scholastics, but the focus on the mother's, nurse's, and child's regimens suggested the possibility of practical application. Similarly and more explicitly, the antiheresy polemicists wrote to oppose the rise of heresy and provided important information for use in public preaching against heretical doctrines. Tales of Jewish violence toward children focused primarily on popular piety, especially on the local cults of child saints and the vernacular legends of the Virgin, all of which contained extensive familial imagery. The chronicles containing narratives of the Children's Crusade are more difficult to contextualize, but they seem to express a variety of contemporary opinions in seeking to explain the unusual events of 1212. All four literatures identified ideal models of conduct for parents and, more generally, for adults toward children and suggested a practical use for lay audiences. Several texts sought either to reflect or to influence lay understandings of childhood and child care.

In particular, some texts articulated a positive, optimistic view of human existence, one that highlighted the importance of love toward children. Writings on ritual murder, for example, include lengthy depictions of maternal love and suffering for children. Just as references to the death of children validated fears for the embryo and unbaptized newborn, so also proper adult attitudes toward children—such as maternal anxiety over a lost child—authenticated the tales of Jewish murder. In some texts the child became the catalyst for pious devotion, for *pietas* in both senses of the word, as religious devotion and familial devotion. In these instances, love of children blurred with love of God. Similarly, God's love for children reasserted the divine concern for all of humanity.

The texts dealing with the religious aspects of child rearing created a child-centered image of Christianity, underscoring God's special protection of children throughout history, God's love for child martyrs, and the necessity of parents' love for children as a parallel to love and devotion to God. The demand that adults have faith helped to accentuate a crucial dilemma in these texts, the problematic issue of children's faith. Early in life, the infant could not have faith and so the doctrine of *fides aliena*—the faith of another—was required to complete his Christian belief. However, later in the child's development, there appeared a bifurcation in the understanding of children's faith. While the child martyrs were generally represented as exhibiting a heartfelt devotion to God, the participants in the Children's Crusade provided a more troubling image of puerile faith, an image focused on their mistaken belief in their own moral worthiness, which some chroniclers portrayed as helping to doom them.

Perhaps the most important socioreligious dimension of these discourses is the emphasis on the family as an integral element of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian piety. While medical writings expressed important misgivings about parental actions, the other literatures tended to portray the domestic world as a worthy and positive space. In each case, the focus was on a dyad, generally a woman and a child. The medical corpus emphasized the relation of mother to fetus and of wetnurse to nursling, relations that, though potentially dangerous, were essential and demanded parental duty and love. Many texts often centered on a dyadic relation between biological or adoptive parents and the young, occasionally emphasizing the physical space of the domestic unit. In the debates over infant baptism, the relation most commonly discussed was that between the infant and the baptismal sponsor, a relationship portrayed as necessary to perpetuate the more important parallel relation between the child's soul and God. The sponsor's—and therefore God's—acceptance of the child stood in opposition to the negative image of the heretic's rejection of the infant. The legends of ritual murder, replete with interactions between an adult and a child, created a strong contrast between positive, highly religious imagery of maternal devotion and mourning—based on a blurring of Mary's roles as loving provider and sad mourner—and the far more negative relation of the male Jew and his young victim. The religious implications of these texts valorized the domestic space based on a positive image of family life taken from the ideal of the *sacra familia*.³

Strict gender differentiation played an important role in the representations of the idealized familial setting. Femininity, especially maternity, rather than masculinity, became the primary focus in all four areas of study. There developed a variety of models for understanding maternity, from the conflicted

understanding of women's biology to the positive spiritual notion of maternal *pietas*. The occasional references to girls in the sources on childhood were equally ambivalent. While references to the salvation of girls under the Old Law reinforced God's validation of a non-gender-specific childhood, references to the pregnancy of the some female crusaders in 1212 indicated that the danger of female sexuality was always present. It is striking that male figures appeared in these texts primarily as aggressors. As the male child grew out of his close relation with women during the earliest stages of life and at exactly the moment of the child's greater contact with men, the number of threats from adult males was perceived to increase. Over and against the perceived aggression of male heretics, Jews, merchants, Muslims, and magicians, the image of God as protective father provided an antidote to male violence.

The depiction of the child as a helpless creature whom God chose to assist allowed for a literalization of God's role as father of all. This potent familial metaphor reappeared often. Just as the child became the center of concern over Jews, heretics, and parents, God personally took an interest in children. The child served to reaffirm the central mystery of Christianity, Christ's decision to be born into the world as a weak, defenseless child, a precious object to be preserved, saved from Herod's wrath. That Jesus took on the form of a child and that he singled out children for blessing and praise reaffirmed the worthiness of both childhood and humanity. The Christ Child and by extension all children became symbols of God's concern for humanity. God's actions were meant to provide a model for all: If He protected and loved and watched over his own, so too should adults.

The pattern of dyadic relations—and the child's close bond to God, as beloved and innocent son, friend, and brother—was broken by the chronicles of the Children's Crusade. Here, the focus was no longer on interaction between a single child and an adult but on the relation of children to one another, gathered together in a misguided, deceived community of Christian children. The discussions of the crusade depicted the destruction of the domestic world by the children—evinced by the children's literal destruction of the bolted door with which parents had tried to restrain them—more than by the antagonistic actions of Jews, heretics, or other external threats. In the narratives of the crusade, the children removed themselves from the domestic sphere with disastrous results, but they did so under the influence of deceptive and magical outside forces. These children, when entering the world outside the family, were represented as controlled and wrested away from parental control by a greater external power, which convinced the children that they could succeed because of their worthiness as children. The focus in these texts shifted to the interaction of the child and the

world at large, a cold, dangerous, and uncaring world, in contrast with the protected space of hearth and home. The child's contact with the world in the events of 1212 entailed a deep sense of loss—a loss of home, parents, simplicity, and innocence, and so a loss of childhood itself. In these chronicles, the child, by definition incomplete, could be made complete only by becoming an adult, by losing the naïveté and moral innocence that were thought to characterize childhood. The end of the process of maturation inevitably involved the metaphoric death of the child, the transformation of a human being from a privileged though problematic phase of life to the dangerous world of adulthood.

Medical writers, polemicists, hagiographers, and chroniclers, employed images of childhood vulnerability in order to argue more forcefully for the reality of the perceived threats. The child's weakness reinforced the boundaries of society by strengthening the distinction between heretic and Catholic, by demonizing Jews, by problematizing women's bodies, and by deepening the contrast between adult and child. However, the notion of the child's privileged status was disputed in the tales of the Children's Crusade where the distinction between child and adult collapsed, as the crusaders made the transition from naïve, innocent children to knowing adolescents. Their recognition of failure, deceit, and sexuality led to the loss of God's favor toward children (seen in chapters 2 and 3) and to the crusaders' assumption of adult responsibilities and weaknesses. Nevertheless, even when acknowledging the inevitable transformation of the children into adults, the texts reaffirmed the earlier uniqueness of the children as vulnerable and threatened by the "tender age" that characterized them. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers summoned the image of the fragile child as a way of calling into question many aspects of the adult world. In the Western Christian society of the central Middle Ages, the child as a cultural category most certainly existed, taking on a multiplicity of meanings at particular moments primarily in relation to suspect social groups and phenomena.

Notes:

Note 1: I by no means wish to imply that no other literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries discusses childhood in detail. Considerable information exists in pedagogical literature (such as Vincent of Beauvais's *De eruditione filiorum nobilium* [ed. by A. Steiner, Cambridge, Mass., 1938]), but this genre generally does not discuss the uniqueness of childhood as clearly as the literatures discussed above. I am currently researching several pious devotions that appear often here: the cults of the Christ Child and of the Holy Innocents, both of which deserve far more attention than I have been able to provide. [back](#)

Note 2: Caroline Walker Bynum addresses precisely the physiological aspects of medieval views of the afterlife in *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995); see esp. 284–91, on the debates over the saved enjoying the *visio dei*. [back](#)

Note 3: David Herlihy, in his AHA presidential address shortly before his death, argued

that the fourteenth century witnessed the beginnings of a notion of the family and domestic space as a refuge against a harsh outside world. I suggest here that the emotional realm of the dyadic relation—especially between mother and child—was represented in the literatures of ritual murder and the Children's Crusade as a similar space of refuge. See Herlihy, "Family," *AHR* 96 (1991): 1–16. [back](#)
