Of Children, Objects, and Seeing

An Introduction

This is a book about children. To be more precise, it is about how adults imagine children in idealized forms in order to give meaning to the individual and collective realities of the present and to aspire for a better tomorrow.

The existence of childhood as a natural and universal condition is taken as a matter of faith in most sections of society in the developed and developing worlds. Such views of idealized childhood are held even in the face of unavoidable evidence that many (perhaps even the majority) of children in the world do not share in the privileges of this idealized childhood. Simultaneously with its representation as a specific, universal human condition, childhood is also juxtaposed to adulthood as a time of ease and of freedom from worry and obligation—an age-defined moment pregnant with possibilities that adulthood leaves unfulfilled. This book uses visual images of children to explore these arrays of adult concerns in specific contexts. In so doing, it delves into questions of broader relevance concerning the nature of emotion and its relationship to religion and society, and of how visual and material culture are instrumental in constructing concepts of individual, community, and nation, as well as of gender and age.

In my treatment of children and childhood and the visual materials that depict them, I make no attempt to engage in definitive or narrow interventions on the nature of emotion or religion, of the place of religion in society, or of how children actually are and should be treated.

My concern in this book is with the ways in which representations of childhood construct individual human behavior and sociocultural ideas through the evocation of emotion. As I argue and demonstrate over the course of several chapters, emotion must be viewed as a broad category under which one can index concepts of morality, ethics, and politics, as well as aspirational acts and ideas at individual and collective levels. In their visual representation, children and childhood become an important site in which attitudes toward society and the purpose of the human condition become articulated.

STUDYING CHILDREN

If the normal study of history and society—as endeavors focused on the actions and behaviors of adults—is fraught with difficulty, studying the place of children is even more so. Children and childhood are invested with complex and contradictory significances, qualities, meanings, and motivations. This is done by adults who define children and whose representations remain the principal ways through which we comprehend the participation of children in society. Childhood is itself a construct of adult design, a label denoting a period not simply of biological juvenescence in the course of human life but rather of an idealized state of being that is markedly different from that of normative (that is, adult) humans. Childhood is simultaneously an idealized, romantic construct and one that constrains children in a diminished human status in which they are denied legal rights afforded adults in the same society. Idealized children—innocent, sweet, cute, and adorable—are reflections of adult concerns about their own state, bearing little resemblance to real children who vacillate between innocence and awareness, morality and immorality, cruelty and kindness, foolishness and wisdom, and so on.

There are many reasons for why adults idealize and romanticize childhood. The obvious one is nostalgia for an individual and collective past. But beyond that, there lies a spectrum of possible motivations to the construction of childhood. Adults view themselves as the finished product of human biology and psychology; in comparison, they see children as unfinished human beings who have yet to complete their journey to social, psychological, and moral completion. It may also be the consequence of a social or biological condition, in that adults have limited memories of their own childhoods. Whatever the cause, our early lives are largely absent from our conscious memories, and what one does remember is often recollected like a film, something that hap-

pened to another and to which we are detached spectators.[1] Adults, for the most part, are cut off from the emotional experiences of their own childhoods; our own recollections of our childhoods are a salad tossed with fragments of memory and emotion from our own experiences mixed with those of others, and dressed with what we've been told about ourselves by older members of our families.

For their part, of course, children see themselves neither as incomplete nor as unsocialized. Nor do they live sheltered and innocent lives shielded from the ominous aspects of the world or devoid of troublesome emotions and desires of their own. In addition to the often ignored fact that children are actors themselves rather than detached spectators or passive objects of social construction, the process of fashioning an idealized childhood also ignores that children make active choices to manipulate their environment, other children, and adults, and in acting as sophisticated consumers.

This book is not about children so much as it is about childhood, and not about the child as much as it is about adults. Nevertheless, it should be obvious to even the casual observer that children and adults seem to think and behave differently, and therefore it stands to reason that the emotional, political, and consumerist choices made by children in buying books, toys, and other moral or religious materials ostensibly targeted at them might be different from the choices made by adults. And similarly, representations of children in visual materials signify something different to adults than they do to children. An important motive for studying children and childhood, therefore, is to get a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of human society and the forces that shape it, in part because children display a different aspect of human behavior than do adults, and partly because children and childhood are central preoccupations of adults as they go about shaping human environments at all levels.

THE THINKING CHILD

Much of the research on childhood as a psychologically and biologically determined stage of human life has occurred in the global North, and especially in Europe and North America. Many questions concerning the universal applicability of such findings remain unanswered, especially with regard to the impact of society on the psychological development of the child. The dominant discourse treats as universal the manner and order in which children acquire competencies. Widely

held theories maintain universal standards of what is necessary for a so-called proper childhood, and psychological theories that lay out and explain the emotional and intellectual stages experienced by children on their journey to adulthood have been instrumental in shaping global ideas concerning the nature of children and of childhood.[2] The concept of biologically determinable, fixed developmental stages is now broadly accepted in Muslim-majority societies, resulting in the view of child development as a universal experience in which physical age, as distinct from sociocultural factors, is the determinant of mental skills and competence. As a result, children are viewed as passive and helpless against the forces of biology, and therefore inevitably and inactively in need of whatever adults consider to be necessary for their successful development, including their socialization.[3]

A detailed discussion of current scholarship on child development is not relevant to my project; instead, I will provide a few brief examples of studies representing influential understandings of the nature of children, their thinking and emotions. In contrast to the biological approach to child development alluded to above (and which is often traced back to Jean Piaget), a behavioralist approach (after Leo Vygotsky) suggests that children "develop competencies through their relationships with other individuals, entailing a contextual and culturally specific understanding of children's maturation."[4] It therefore seems probable, from such a perspective, that differences in child-rearing practices and other social factors would result in psychological variations among children, which would have consequences for how they deal with circumstance and, equally importantly, how they view the state of childhood, its limits and responsibilities, and its relationship to adulthood.

This nature-versus-nurture debate carries on among specialists in child development and psychology, with many continuing to advocate universalist theories on the nature of childhood that have ramifications for attitudes toward reading, playing, art, and many other things. They help shape beliefs concerning the diminished nature of children relative to adults, including the hypothesis that children are innocent of intentional meanings when they act as narrators or think up stories, and that they don't allow meaning to shape their narratives.[5]

A similar biological developmental perspective also pertains to children's understanding of fantasy and their susceptibility to advertising. According to some research, biological age seems to be the determining factor in children's responses to advertising, especially in the early years when they are still shifting the ways in which they process information.

It was argued some decades ago (and the theory continues to hold scholarly sway in the societies at the center of this book) that children between the ages of two and eleven are most vulnerable to advertising because their cognitive structures are still in a formative stage and therefore they are more sensitive to external factors. This holds especially true for those under seven, when children are increasingly controlled by symbolic relationships and images, and make judgments about things that they will retain in the future.[6]

A child's ability to discriminate between reality and fantasy is also regarded as directly related to biological age, such that children under five years old are thought to have trouble differentiating between humans and animated characters.[7] This has direct bearing on their belief in imaginary characters and monsters and their management of emotion. In one study, children of approximately four, five, and seven years old were made to listen to scenarios of a lone child or one accompanied by another person (a mother, father, or friend) who then encounters what looks like a real or imaginary fear-inducing creature. The child participants in the experiment were then asked to explain the intensity of fear experienced by the child in the scenario and to suggest coping strategies. The experiment's results showed age-related differences in the children's judgments concerning the intensity of fear that would be experienced in a specific scenario, and also an increased understanding among the older children that one's mind has the capacity to reduce as well as to induce fear, particularly where imaginary creatures are concerned. But, as one grows older, one's ability to manipulate one's environment through the imagination also decreases according to this study, in the sense that, at the same time as children become better able to remind themselves that scary monsters are not real, they also become less able to transform a scary ghost into a friendly one in their minds.[8]

Similar experiments have been conducted on the ability of children to create and identify emotions in visual images, with varying results. In one study, children in the first, fourth, and seventh grades were required to deliberately modify their drawings of a tree to depict it as happy or sad. The older children utilized a great number of strategies to represent emotion—including referencing themes of death and illness, the passage of time and seasons, and the process of aging. A second study looked at children in the second, fourth, and sixth grades; they were given the same assignment as the children in the first study, and were also administered a standard test of visual metaphor comprehension (the Metaphoric Triads Test). This group also connected emotion to themes of illness, aging,

and death, as well as through drawing a tree in different shapes and sizes. In a third study, preschool children were shown twelve especially made drawings that depicted emotions thematically (for example, using a thunderstorm to represent anger), and another twelve in which abstract qualities (such as colors or lines) were used. Of all the various combinations, these children had the biggest problems identifying sad items drawn abstractly, although for all other possibilities their ability to identify emotions was only "above chance levels,"[9] meaning that they were never particularly accurate in linking emotion to visual images.

This discussion of approaches to child psychological and emotional development is by no means intended to be exhaustive; it is offered to demonstrate the range of thinking on the subject in some aspects of the social sciences that have been picked up in current scholarship on these topics in the Islamic world. Other research on the thinking and behavior of young children suggests that children and adults think somewhat differently, especially in the degree to which fantasy and reality coexist in their lives, but that this difference is not qualitative but rather is based on the presence or absence of cumulative experience—in other words, it is environmentally and socially determined. The greater propensity of children to fantasize is apparent even from casual observance of young children at "pretend" play. Children begin pretending toward the end of their second year, and their participation in pretend play peaks just before they enter school, only to decrease between the ages of five and eight.[10] Studies also estimate that between 25 percent and 65 percent of children have imaginary friends, a phenomenon that peaks between the ages of three and eight, and tends to disappear by ten.[11]

There is a difference between fantasizing, thinking about fantasy, and fantastical thinking, the last of which can be seen as synonymous with magical thinking, wherein causal relationships between two objects or events do not follow conventional laws or principles. Fantastical (and magical) thinking is sometimes viewed disparagingly either as lacking any governing principles of action or else as based in misconceptions or ignorance of empirically known natural laws. However, one might argue that it is not always ignorance but rather a willful desire to believe something different that determines fantastical thinking. Studies suggest that children see wishing as a process that is both mental and magical, as well as one requiring skill or expertise. In other words, children do not believe that wishing alone can accomplish what they desire, but that it exists in some relationship to skill.[12] For children over the age of four, their fantastical thinking does not appear to be the result of an

inability to separate fantasy from reality. Instead, they are reliant on idiosyncratic systems of thinking about causality, in which the fantastical or extraordinary plays a larger role than it does in the thinking of most adults (although there is no shortage of examples one can provide in which adults think wishfully and nonrationally).

Despite the move toward understanding child psychology and development in experientially and socially shaped terms rather than purely biological ones (including Freudian models of drive-ridden egos, preoedipal and oedipal stages, and the like), biological determinism pervades much of cultural thinking as it pertains to children. Bourdieu's theories of individual participation in society rely on such an understanding, when he understands the socialization of children in terms of "a narcissistic organization of the libido in which the child takes himself as an object of desire to another state in which he orients himself towards another person, thus entering the world of object relations."[13] Bourdieu sees this process as involving the "sacrifice of self-love," implying that the entire enterprise of socialization and participating in society is some sort of loss of self.[14] Of course, his concern is not with individual psychic development but with social processes and the dynamics of the *habitus,* but it is interesting, nonetheless, that Bourdieu seems to be minimizing the importance of individuality and individualized exercises of making meaning in his formulation of a theory that explains social reproduction and transformation.

This all goes to show that, while children are legitimate and distinct actors in their own right whose biological juvenescence results in social and psychological circumstances that make them act differently from adults, adults make effective choices in imagining children that are motivated by adult needs and concerns. And very often, adults have an investment in impressing these imagined constructions upon children in order to make the latter partners in a comprehensive social understanding of the nature of childhood. This book uses visual images of children to explore these arrays of adult concerns in specific contexts. In so doing, it delves into issues of broader relevance concerning the nature of emotion and its relationship to religion, and of how visual and material culture is instrumental in constructing ideas of the individual, society, and nation, as well as of gender and age.

MY METHOD

I undertake this task by focusing on visual representations of specific and defined sorts in three modern, Muslim-majority societies, these

being the nation-states of Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. I analyze the use of images of children in Turkish home-schooling religious books, religious posters in Pakistan, and books, posters, and postage stamps from Iran. The data is chosen to develop ideas concerning the role of childhood and children as locations of enacted emotion, both individual and societal, the implications of which are teased out from the examples discussed. Each of the three case studies is designed to highlight one category of visual artifacts of importance to my project, although the phenomena emphasized in each chapter are found in the other cases: there are homeschooling books in Iran and Pakistan, national ideologies pervading textbooks in Pakistan and Turkey, and religious posters of various kinds are to be found in Turkey and Iran. The construction of case studies is designed to highlight theoretical issues in three contexts as a means of reinforcing my argument, not to suggest that the phenomena are exclusive.

The choice of contexts is determined partly by the nature and availability of visual materials featuring children and partly by the contiguity of the countries as societies, which promises a degree of commensurability between them. Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan have their differences, but they lie on a historical and cultural continuum of what can be called Persianate (or Turco-Persianate) cultures, which lends them certain similarities in matters of religion and society. By this I refer to the shared aspects of language, literature, aesthetics, court culture, intellectual traditions, and administrative institutions that brought together the Islamic communities of much of Central and South Asia, the Iranian plateau, and Anatolia and the Balkans from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the case of Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, the trajectories by which they came to be nation-states, through to the latter part of the last century and the beginnings of this one, also invite comparison, albeit with the full acknowledgment that these are three very distinct national cultures.

All three nation-states (like many others in the world) are strongly ideological, but they differ in how specific ideologies are implemented in society, which in and of itself makes a joined study of childhood, religion, and visual culture fruitful at levels beyond the local and descriptive. All three are multiethnic states, and all three have been shaped to a large degree by their encounters with colonial empires and a continuing strategic, military, and political engagement with global powers. But where there are important similarities, there are also great differences, and in certain important ways two of the countries sometimes resemble each other more than the third. Thus, although modern Tur-

key and Iran are more similar to each other in terms of infrastructure and education than they are to Pakistan, Turkey and Pakistan are religiously more similar, having predominantly Sunni populations—with almost exactly the same ratio of Sunnis to Shi'is (roughly 80 percent Sunni, 20 percent Shi'i), although the majority of their Shi'i population belongs to different sects. Their ratio of Sunnis to Shi'is is an almost exact corollary of that in Iran; Pakistan's and Iran's Shi'i populations are mostly of the same sect, with the Shi'is of Pakistan maintaining very close ties to Iranian religious authorities and organizations. All three societies have a deep-seated belief in the existence of charismatic religious authority and *baraka* (*bereket* in Turkish, *barkat* in Persian and Urdu), a topic I address briefly in chapter 6.

Iran's distinctiveness is most apparent due to its formal religious difference and long history as a monarchical state in almost exactly the same borders as it possesses today. Furthermore, religious visual art occupies a place in the public religious culture of Iran that is unrivaled in Turkey and Pakistan (or any other Muslim-majority country for that matter). As I discuss briefly below, there is a varying degree of ambivalence concerning the propriety of religious images among Sunnis, a fact that has measurable impact on the use of images in both Pakistan and Turkey. Although Iranian society is not without its own rules concerning visual representation, and much of the Iranian material presented in this book would not be objectionable purely on representational grounds in the other two countries, these images are inseparable from the broader visual regime of Iranian society and, as such, arguably are significantly different from posters and picture books from Pakistan and Turkey in the meanings they hold and responses they elicit within their own visual regime.

All three states have a history of strong ties with the West. These are primarily strategic rather than cultural and collapsed into hostility in the case of Iran almost four decades ago; state-level ties with the West remain strong in the cases of Turkey and Pakistan, although with substantial ambivalence from most concerned parties. In other examples of similarities and differences, in contrast to the (imagined) historical stability of Iran as a national entity, both Turkey and Pakistan are modern creations—residual states carved from imperial entities of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, and with a population formed through large-scale migration of Muslims into the country and of non-Muslims out of them. Both states promote an explicit narrative of nationhood, formed on land that is not the ancestral home of its

imagined national people and whose founding fathers (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Mohammad Ali Jinnah) were natives of towns outside the countries' present borders. Both are republics with a strong military, which has played decisive roles in forming ideology and governing the country and which, at some point, invited the participation of religious forces in national formation as a means of counteracting perceived threats from secularist, democratic, and subnational actors.

I do not provide lengthy histories or sociological surveys of the countries in question—these are readily available elsewhere. I include such information only insofar as it supplies a context within which to deliver convincing analysis of the questions that inform this project. Rather than try to construct each society as a scopic regime or a comprehensive visual sensorium, I look at the specific contexts as possessing their own sophisticated and polyvalent attitudes toward religious and consumer culture, as well as toward visuality. Each society could be disaggregated as well, since individuals and communities exhibit difference in attitudes and behaviors among themselves and across time. Through the window provided by specific types of visual material, I attempt to excavate various aspects of human attitudes, aspirations, emotions, and acts, seeing in sociocultural forces and events a lived, religious engagement with objects, other people, and the environment. In so doing, I am not trying to disassemble the grand projects of secularization that have been so influential in shaping modern thought and society, including in the Islamic world. On the contrary, I take for granted the existence of pious communities and, following Judith Butler, I believe that such communities establish norms which are both stabilized and destabilized through their reformulations across time, and therefore that they constantly engender meaning.[15]

THE AESTHETIC SOCIAL IMAGINATION

When thinking about a social system in which human beings individually and collectively interact with visual objects—through creating them, making consumer choices regarding them, and interacting with them in ways that further ideological formations and socioreligious, political understandings—one must necessarily think in aesthetic terms. But here I make a distinction between aesthetics as a nonutilitarian form of contemplation of art and what I am terming the *aesthetic social imagination*. In either model, aesthetics functions as an essential aspect of human experience and not as a disposable luxury connected to the idle appreciation of art. In the words of Virginia Postrel:

Aesthetics is the way we communicate through the senses. It is the art of creating reactions without words, through the look and feel of people, places, and things. Hence, aesthetics differs from entertainment that requires cognitive engagement with narrative, word play, or complex intellectual allusion. While the sound of poetry is arguably aesthetic, the meaning is not. Spectacular special effects and beautiful movie stars enhance box-office success in foreign markets because they offer universal aesthetic pleasure; clever dialogue which is cognitive and culture-bound doesn't travel well. Aesthetics may complement storytelling, but is not itself narrative. Aesthetics shows rather than tells, delights rather than instructs. The effects are immediate, perpetual, and emotional.[16]

The term *aesthetics* is used in enough nonspecific ways that I am forced to define what I mean by traditional aesthetics. Very briefly, aesthetics came about as an area of Western philosophy in the middle of the eighteenth century. The first major figure to articulate the field, Alexander Baumgarten, saw it as a sphere of sensory perception that he referred to as "lower cognitive faculties."[17] He argued that traditional philosophical concerns with conceptual thinking and rationality ignored swathes of human experience, what has been referred to as "the whole of our sensate life together—the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world."[18] Thus in its origins, aesthetics was concerned with the material experiences grounded in the sensate body and with the emotional and affective responses they encompass and engender.

Along the way aesthetics, as a field of inquiry that started out exploring sensory and embodied forms of experience in relation to the material world, became refined into a form of thought focused on the contemplation of fine art, with the broad spectrum of human experience reduced to the disinterested contemplation of beauty. This development was not accidental, since explicit within the formative phase of modern aesthetics was the understanding that certain varieties of experience are superior to others. In particular, the contemplation of beauty is superior to idleness and boredom, since it is presumed to be morally uplifting as compared to boredom, which reflects failures of moral vigilance and self-discipline.[19] Simultaneously, experience and sensation are frustratingly difficult to describe in words except through analogy and exemplification. This form of description occurs effectively in art, thereby leading aesthetics as a field directly into the realm of fine art and reconstituting it as a form of art theory. Baumgarten maintained that sensory impressions, emotions, and fantasies were not fitting subjects

with which philosophers should occupy their time. The human experience of life needs to be lifted above such base sensory and fantastical preoccupations, implying that the concerns of aesthetics are ultimately ones of moral improvement, in which aestheticians after Baumgarten are preoccupied with refining human perception and sensation. Aesthetics becomes the pursuit of goodness and virtue, through the contemplation of all that is best and most beautiful in art and literature.[20]

Such questions define Kant's writings on aesthetics, which are ultimately concerned with the sublimely beautiful. Explicit in these concepts of aesthetics is the belief that true beauty is enduring and engenders virtue, and that the sensory experiences of appreciating beauty are superior to and distinct from those of quotidian experience or those elicited by interacting with everyday objects. Being distinct as a category of human production and contemplation—and also because it embodies a moral purpose—beauty must necessarily possess recognizable, reproducible, and stable properties. In other words, it must be formal and lend itself to systematic analysis and description.

One can make a case for a more experientially grounded notion of aesthetics even in the instance where one is concerned with the experiencing of beauty. Viewed from many religious perspectives—and certainly the ones that dominate in Islamic cultures—beauty and goodness exist in all things, including imperfect ones. Religious reactions to sensory inputs are themselves aesthetic, in that they do not rest contemplatively in the present but, rather, anticipate knowledge to be revealed in the future, as a consequence of which a religious gaze can be referred to as an "apocalyptic glance."[21] Such a religious aesthetic is different from the concept of disinterested aesthetic contemplation that lies at the heart of Kantian aesthetics, wherein the contemplation of beauty constitutes a noninstrumental form of enjoyment. Things—art and literature mostly—are beautiful in this view for the very reason that their purposes for existence are intrinsic to them rather than due to some utilitarian use to which they might be put (and which could conceivably cease to exist, thereby rendering them obsolete). Unfettered by any utilitarian or instrumental needs of the viewer, the beautiful object exists only to be the object of contemplation. From a Kantian perspective, it is the object's representation in the imagination that is the subject of this disinterested aesthetic contemplation, not the physical object itself, which, after all, can never fully escape its humdrum existence.

A concern with beauty plays a major part in much of the premodern Islamic writing on aesthetics. This holds true especially for Islamic

philosophy, which bears a strong mark of Platonic and Aristotelian thought. Medieval Islamic philosophical writings argue for an intimate connection between beauty and aesthetics, asserting that beautiful visual objects provide a taste of heavenly beauty to come and have the ability to evoke love in the viewer. For Muslim thinkers (as for Plato), beauty is moral in nature rather than purely aesthetic and therefore is inseparable from virtue.[22] The Qur'an also addresses beauty on many occasions, and is itself considered the epitome of beauty. The importance of beauty is also upheld by a famous saying attributed to Muhammad in which he declares: "God is beautiful and He loves beauty." As is discussed in chapter 6, the commonest Arabic words for beauty are closely linked etymologically and in usage to words for goodness and virtue. And in most Islamic philosophical thought, beauty is primarily moral and based on a harmony of physical and moral qualities. The encyclopedic thinker Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 CE) twinned moral and physical beauty when he asserted that the sensory perception of beauty "harmonizes with the cognitive soul, which enjoys perceiving that which is in harmony with itself" in much the same way that the souls of lovers meet and blend together. He goes on to declare that the "perfection of proportion and setting are the quintessence of beauty in everything."[23] He makes his point clearly in the following passage:

> Agreeable sensations of vision and hearing are caused by harmonious arrangement in the forms and qualities of [the things seen or heard]. This impresses the soul as harmonious and is more agreeable to it.
>
> If an object of vision is harmonious in the forms and lines given to it in accordance with the matter from which it is made, so that the requirements of its particular matter as to perfect harmony and arrangement are not discarded—that being the meaning of beauty and loveliness whenever these terms are used for any object of sensual perception—that [object of vision] is then in harmony with the soul that perceives [it], and the soul thus feels pleasure as the result of perceiving something that is agreeable to it. . . . Thus every man desires beauty in the objects of vision and hearing, as a requirement of his nature.[24]

One important problem with the philosophical aesthetics of disinterested contemplation is that it ignores the majority of human experiences, emotions, and behaviors in the way that it lauds apophatic (transcendent and ineffable) concepts of experience over cataphatic (immanent and experiential) ones.[25] If one were to accept that only the disinterested contemplation of beauty is legitimate in aesthetics, then one would be discombobulated and threatened by the many unstable

and somatic ways in which human beings seek out and respond to everyday images. Lessing, Burke, and others make this very point when they see everyday images as signs of a religious, sexual, and social "other" and therefore deserving of derision as well as of fear. The derision results from a belief that nonartistic images are unevocative and powerless, an inferior order of signs compared to fine art. The fear is from the knowledge that these signs have a valency that affords agency to the societies and individuals who believe in and interact with them, as a result of which these supposedly inferior signs gain potency. It is a realization that no stable system of theories of art and aesthetics can either fully explain or contain the power of images in society at large and that, ultimately, objects are first and foremost not the subject of disinterested aesthetic contemplation but part of a web of sociocultural experience that is mediated, accessible, and popular, existing in myriad ways that remain unpredictable.[26]

In actual fact, aesthetics—as it operates in society—does not rely on a detached and disinterested form of pleasure; it is the very fact that it entails an emotional response that makes aesthetics relevant to human life. Aesthetic response is a vital affective force in society that possesses real power by generating emotional and sensory reactions that go on to shape future expectations and motivate human beings—individually and collectively—to seek out further experiences of a similar aesthetic nature. The power of the visual object in society is directly dependent on an aesthetic social imagination that engenders experiential commonalities and connects aspirations, understandings, and anxieties to the allure of visual objects. Conceived in this way, aesthetics is an expansive concept that aims to recover its broad meaning from before developments in philosophy that have reduced it to the contemplation of beauty.

In this project, I attempt to rehabilitate the notion of aesthetics from before it made a turn to art in the Europe of the eighteenth century, and to reconnect it to the Aristotelian term *aisthesis*, which explicitly refers to perception and embodied experience. The aesthetic social imagination is engendered by a variety of aesthetic practices, but it is expressed most clearly through the presence of and interaction with the broad array of consumer objects found in all societies, which engender a variety of affective allegiances. Visual objects and material goods have the capacity to evoke sensory responses, or to captivate. "As elements of aesthetic experience, they do not just provide evocations of times past or moral reckonings, but affective sense of space, literally territories of feeling."[27]

Such a concept of aesthetics allows for a broad relationship to morality and virtue, in the sense that emotion itself is almost impossible to conceive of without a moral component—cruelty, hurt, disgust, and disdain all carry moral colorings, as do kindness, happiness, admiration, and love.[28] An aesthetic social imagination also possesses a natural relationship with politics and the orderings and dispositions of society, although it is not one that allows for predictable outcomes and tightly structured systems of persuasion. Instead, the aesthetic social imagination operates at the level of an amorphous sphere of activity and interaction in which human beings cannot help but be drawn to and interact with their material and visual environments.

That the pervasive social functions of visual and material objects are often trivialized in discussions about art, culture, and religion is not at all surprising. Aside from the project of philosophical aesthetics outlined briefly above, dominant strains of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (as well as other religious systems) tend to deemphasize the physical, material, and somatic relative to the ethereal, metaphysical, and intellectual. In a European context, much of the Enlightenment project attempted to safeguard true art from popular religion and its messy materialities and emotional excesses. Not just the Enlightenment but the Protestant Reformation and other religious reformist movements incorporated substantial antimaterial and antipopulist elements. In similar fashion, the majority of Islamic reform movements of the last two centuries have valorized the nonmaterial over the material, seeing the latter as related to superstition, exploitive religious practices, and anti- or premodernity. Despite—and also because of—the ways in which religious thinkers and movements relevant to this study show discomfort concerning the place of visuality and materiality, it remains important to address the subject briefly.

LOOKING AND SEEING

Visual images—their nature, their function, and viewers' reactions to them—have been studied extensively in a number of disciplines. A few aspects of visuality require discussion in the present context: issues of religion, arts, and visual culture, especially as they relate to Islam; the matter of how we can confidently treat images as sources of sociocultural information; and the argument that vision and seeing must be understood as somatic, embodied, and inextricably linked to all the other senses. The implications of the last point for the nature of human

experience, emotion, and affective responses are so great that I have devoted the next chapter to the subject.

The status of visual images in Islam remains one of the most misunderstood aspects of the religion and of cultures associated with it. Controversies over images in modern times contrast strikingly with a rich artistic culture of figural human representation in painting and other arts. A lengthy discussion of the place of visual imagery in Islamic societal history is beyond the scope of this book. I have dealt with questions of visuality in Islamic history elsewhere and therefore will only address questions of representation in Islamic society as they pertain to the project at hand.[29]

There is no one position on the place of religious images in Islamic society or religion that holds true across time and geography. In fact, specific societies often display conflicting attitudes toward religious visual art, and particularly toward representational art. This is largely due to the fact that the use of religious visual images is not theorized in Islamic history, in the sense that there have never been historical moments of sustained debate about the nature and place of visual images. The same applies to didactic images and their use. Instead, controversies involving images—in the past as in the present—arise and are dealt with on an ad hoc basis as part of the sociopolitical use of images. It is these dynamic factors that continue to determine issues of iconoclasm in modern Islamic societies and the protests over visual representations of Muhammad and other Muslim figures in European satirical media.

The complex place of visual representation in Islamic history notwithstanding, it is an observable fact that the majority of modern Islamic societies and denominations have embraced a position of strong opposition to representational religious art. This is much more true of Sunni communities than Shi'i ones, and covers a spectrum from total tolerance of representations in religious contexts, to an acceptance of everything other than images of religious heroes, to an antipathy toward representations of human beings, to a blanket opposition to all figural representation.

The fact remains that religious materials directed at children frequently use images to make them more appealing, and the proliferation of audiovisual media has meant that there are religious programs specifically intended for children that are unabashedly representational and are accepted unproblematically by the majority of the Muslim populations in which they circulate. Perhaps the best-known example of such a work is the graphic novel *The 99*, which was launched in 2006 by a

Kuwaiti entrepreneur with an interest in writing children's books. The series takes its name from the Islamic belief that God has ninety-nine most beautiful epithets that describe divine qualities. Each of the heroes of the comic series takes his or her name from one such divine quality, which serves as a superpower that gets amplified when individual heroes join together in triads. *The 99* faced opposition from some quarters because the reference to God's names was understood by critics as a form of representing God visually, but the majority of the comic's readership didn't seem to find the association problematic.[30] *The 99* was lavishly produced in print and received international acclaim, but moved to an electronic format after only five issues and continued production until 2013 (for a total of thirty-five issues), accompanied by an array of related consumer goods.[31]

A more recent example of didactic Islamic visual media intended for children is found in the Pakistani cartoon series *Burka Avenger*. It features a school teacher who changes into a very ninja-like burqa-clad superhero in order to fight against the forces of evil, personified by a villainous cleric who tries to keep the population benighted and a feudal lord who prevents them from being educated so that they remain ignorant of their rights. The Urdu series has won several international awards, is dubbed into at least six languages, and is broadcast in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan in addition to being available online.[32] Less controversial than *The 99*, *Burka Avenger* flips the paradigm of religious representation by using the veil as a costume—as distinct from a symbol of empowerment—and pitting the burqa-clad superhero as an icon of good moral values against a corrupt view of traditional religion.

Both these cases raise the issue of how to represent Islamic religious subjects visually. Aside from these two examples, a number of strategies are employed to reconcile the use of images with societal proscriptions, be they explicit or implicit. The problem of visual representation is most severe with religious texts, and the easiest way to avoid controversy is either to not use images at all, to avoid representing human beings, or to not depict important religious personages such as the Prophet. Each of these choices constitutes a differently restrictive notion of the permissibility of images. In many contexts, there is a clear understanding that younger children have greater pedagogical need for pictures, and so age-graded sequences of children's religious books often demonstrate a decreasing use of images in progressively higher-level books. This is very much the case for government-approved Pakistani religious textbooks produced by the publisher Ferozsons: the first-year book uses

FIGURE 1. Illustration of the Abrahamic Sacrifice, from Mürşide Uysal [n.d.],
Peygamberimizin Hayatı, 1: Hz. Muhammed'in Doğumu (Istanbul: Uysal Yayınevi), 4.

images to illustrate good behavior as well as historical religious stories,
but by the third year the painted illustrations accompanying religious
stories are gone and have been replaced with actual photographs of the
Ka'ba and its sanctuary.[33]

The Turkish case displays a much broader range of representational
strategies than does the Pakistani one, in part because Turkish society is
more permissive regarding religious representation in general. Some
books, such as those written by the respected author of children's reli-
gious books M. Yaşar Kandemir and published in the "Dinim Serisi"
(My Religion) series of Damla Press, are lavishly illustrated with paint-
ings of human beings, animals and plants, but refrain from representing
either venerated religious figures or specific religious events (such as
those mentioned in the Qur'an or from Muhammad's life). Even so,
many conservative religious bookstores refuse to carry Kandemir's
books because they are considered inappropriate on account of their
illustrations.[34] Other texts depict well-known moments in religious his-
tory complete with people, but make a point of not depicting religious
heroes such as Muhammad, earlier prophets, or their families. This
holds true for books whose illustrations are done in traditional, realistic
styles as well as the more recent publications that follow the aesthetics
of cartoons, comics, anime, and manga. As an example of the first kind,
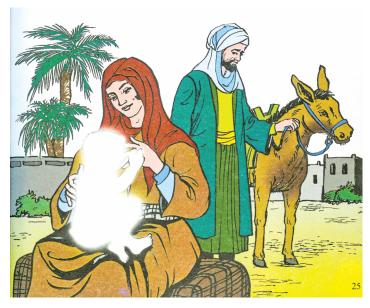
FIGURE 2. Illustration of Muhammad as a baby, from Mürşide Uysal [n.d.], *Peygamberimizin Hayatı, 1: Hz. Muhammed'in Doğumu* (Istanbul: Uysal Yayınevi), 25.

the many books by Mürşide Uysal on the life of the prophet Muhammad, earlier prophets, and episodes from the Qur'an rely on effacement techniques used in Ottoman painting: figure 1 depicts the moment of Ibrahim's (Abraham's) sacrifice of his son and the substitution of a ram. Both Ibrahim's and Isma'il's faces have been effaced, although the rest of their bodies appear intact, including young Isma'il's hair.

In the case of illustrations of an infant Muhammad in the arms of his wet nurse, Halima, such as the one in figure 2, and also ones depicting him later in his life, his entire body is effaced to the degree that it is obvious from the illustrations that the figure of Muhammad was only drawn as an empty outline before being blotted out further in white. Note, however, that Halima, who is venerated among Muslims as one of the early heroes close to the Prophet, is shown with her face uncovered.

Among the Turkish children's books surveyed for this project, representational strategies strongly correlate both with the publisher and with the illustrator of the book. Thus the above examples from a book published by Uysal Press and written by Mürşide Uysal, a prolific writer of children's and women's religious books and a frequent guest on women's religious television shows, is characteristic of other books by

the same publisher. In contrast, books from the large and dynamic Timaş Press, and particularly the work of the illustrator Cem Kızıltuğ (of which examples appear in chapter 5), not only do not depict religious figures but use highly stylized comic forms to represent people, animals and even other things that would not be judged objectionable by most viewers even if they were depicted realistically.

VISUALITY AND RELIGION

Issues related to visual representation encountered in the Islamic world are by no means unique to it, in that religious representation, broadly defined, raises questions of whether there is something distinct to the religious image or the religious uses of images, of how images are deployed, how they impact the viewer, and how this impact is understood or perceived. Two obvious points to ponder are whether there are culturally specific ways of seeing, and if religion requires its own categories for understanding visuality and sensory systems. The first question is easy to answer in the affirmative—as I explore at length in the next chapter, sociocultural constructions are essential to the expression and understanding of perception, sensation and emotion. The latter question is more difficult to address: religion is a problematic category for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it is inherently unstable, referring simultaneously to systematic ideological systems, atomized and multivalent beliefs, and a range of individual and cultural practices, all of which are in a state of constant flux relative to each other at the very same time that religious practitioners argue for the category's inherent, timeless immutability.

The study of religion in the Western academy takes a number of different attitudes toward the existence of religion as a discrete phenomenon. On the one hand, the fact that human beings tend to exhibit beliefs and practices across time and culture that seem recognizable and comparable, even similar, mitigates in favor of an underlying human characteristic or behavioral system that is rightly called *religion*. Contrary to scholars who argue for a transcendental quality to religion, even if one considers the *religious* to be behavioral (as scholars with a sociological bent from Durkheim and Weber on down have done), *religion* and *religiosity* remain categories to contend with in the study of human society. It is not only scholars like Rudolph Otto who see a fascinating, incomprehensible force outside of the human person as the location of the religious, or like Mircea Eliade who argue for an essential unity to the religious by juxtaposing

seemingly commensurate human behaviors in the physical world. Even scholars who study social and material phenomena frequently see religion as powerful in its own right, "other than man and yet related to him," and residing in objects outside the individual.[35]

Absent any satisfactorily comprehensive definition of religion, I take a functionalist, social, sensory and psychological approach to the subject. For my purposes here, religion should be understood to be the multivalent and impermanent systems of behavior and belief in which human beings participate as individuals and as members of societies. I do not concern myself with truth claims or meanings, but with the manifestations of belief and ideology in visual, written and emotive forms, through which (paraphrasing Robert Orsi) the invisible is made visible.[36]

The implications of such an understanding of religion on visual art are far reaching because it locates the relationship of visual culture outside debates over sacrality and secularization or topics such as iconicity and iconoclasm, and centers it instead in the area of human experience.[37] Visual materials serve many purposes in a system of this sort, such that they do not lend themselves to morphological categorization—among other things, they can be aesthetic (in the senses outlined above), generators of meaning or affirmation, or they can be icons, talismans and other objects imbued with religious functions. They can also be tokens and instruments of aspiration and other emotions, explicit reminders to good behavior, or gestures toward a better future as might be called "wish images."[38]

Underlying any discussion of visuality lurks a tension between the properties—even agency—of the object that is seen, and the power and understanding of the viewer. I place the visual object in a broader framework of material culture and its concern with objects, visual and otherwise. The viewer belongs at the center of such a discussion as the interpreter and agent, acting both on her own and as a participant in broader sociocultural processes. Vision and visuality center on the viewer whose act of viewing must be located in that individual's embodied personhood. David Morgan categorizes religious ways of seeing under the concept of the "gaze," a visceral way of seeing for which he provides a morphology of types.[39] Morgan discusses the human being both as the viewer and as the object of the gaze, which he sees as synonymous with a visual field or way of seeing. The major thesis of his detailed study is that seeing is, first and foremost, embodied, and cannot be uncoupled from the body or the other senses, an important point that he stresses by referring to somatic visuality in all its forms as the "embodied eye."

It is the concept of seeing as an embodied act—conscious or otherwise—that defines my notion of visuality in this book. That the physical act of seeing (and the accompanying process of perception) is embodied like the other senses—perhaps even somatic, despite the participation of the mind in the process of visual perception—should not need much explanation. But even in a broader sense, vision occurs in the body; individuals make complex interpretive choices concerning what to look at and what they have seen, and they react based on prior experiences and sociocultural conditioning. My assertion that visuality is embodied in this sense is to say that it is a multisensory phenomenon as well as an emotional one, in that we feel *through, about,* and *from* the visual, as we do with other senses and emotional experiences.

The nature of emotion, feeling, and affect as they relate to sociocultural attitudes and more narrowly to attitudes toward children and their representation is addressed in the next two chapters. Here I would like to underline briefly the embodied nature of experience as a conceptual structure that allows us to think about the visuality of lived experience and its relationship to circulated objects such as children's books and posters in a way that focuses on the human being in relation to visual material objects. Merleau-Ponty lucidly highlighted the importance of embodiment and its relationship to the world around it through his concept of prereflective bodily consciousness, claiming that the body itself is the instrument of comprehension in the perceived world, in that all material and other objects are woven into the body's fabric.[40] The implication of such a view is that human beings exist neither sensationally nor perceptionally independent of the material and visual worlds that impinge upon them and upon which they act. The material and sensory world is not something independent of us that awaits our perception, but rather is *what* we perceive.[41]

Merleau-Ponty drives home the unstable relationship between the human being, perception, materiality, and objects by giving the example of a blind man's stick: "The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it."[42]

The implication of a comprehensively embodied concept of visuality and the consequent placement of vision in a network of the senses is to

render untenable the idea that the *visual* exists apart from the *material* or the *sensory*. It rules out the possibility of treating visual objects in society as part of a scopic regime, even of one that we acknowledge to be contextual and varied.[43] Vision, like the other senses and feelings, is part of an embodied sensorium joining human beings with the material and imaginal objects around them.

OBJECTS AND AGENCY

Objects are difficult to study and discuss, in large part because writing and discussion per force treat their subjects as "a text or as a language, as something that represents something else, and that is there to be interpreted."[44] Nevertheless, a number of social-scientific fields (not the least of them cultural anthropology through the works of Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour) have made substantial advances in our ability to comprehend the amorphous but pervasive power of objects. At its broadest, one can think of objects as everything apart from human organisms with which the latter interact in some way. Talal Asad has suggested that "the power of things—whether animate or inanimate—is their ability to act within a network of enabling conditions. . . . Feeling, remembering, hoping are as physical as they are mental."[45] In this sense, society and politics themselves become vitally material through the capacity of objects "to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."[46]

To say that material and visual objects have power is not to suggest that they have abilities or sentience all their own that they use autonomously. Rather, it implies that objects have agency in the complex web of interactions that joins them to other objects and beings. They possess an emotive force, allowing them to function as sites of activity and negotiation, such that they participate in the construction of meaning and in shaping social relations.[47] Visual and material objects possess what might be referred to as an "affecting presence," which they gain in no small part through their interrelation with human life events, social processes, and cultural systems.[48] Linked to the human beings with whom it interacts, the object functions as a perfect mirror because it reflects back to the human being not some objectively real image of things as they are, but a *desired* one.[49] It is for this reason that we are invested in the perceptible things in our environment, since everything that we wish for that we cannot find in ourselves or in our existing human relationships or past interactions with objects we invest as

potentialities in other objects. In so doing, objects become locations of emotion, or at least the means to them: "Objects become 'happiness means.' Or we could say they become happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness. . . . Groups cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight."[50] If objects and images make us happy or affirm us in particular ways, we are drawn to them and react in a particular way; if they make us sad or upset us, we might avoid them or invest them with a different set of emotive qualities. It is these properties of objects, and of visual objects in particular, as means and signifiers of collective and individual emotion and aspiration that inform much of my thinking in this project.

ON STRUCTURE AND METHOD

This books proceeds in three parts, these being the establishment of a theoretical frame concerning human beings, their emotions and affects as they exist in an embodied sociocultural and historical frame, followed by the analysis of specific data, followed by a conclusion. Some of the theoretical discussion has been attempted in the current chapter, while specific issues of emotion and affect as well as the implications of recognizing emotion as culturally and socially grounded are explored at length in chapter 2. This is followed by two chapters that build upon the methodological framework in order to explore important sociocultural ideas, including notions of childhood, innocence, and cuteness; education and socialization; and gendering children and its implications. The second part contains three chapters, each of which comprises a case study from the contemporary Islamic world that serves as the principal context by which to illustrate one or more important points of broader relevance. The discussion on Turkey in chapter 5 focuses on children's religious books for homeschooling and general edification, and serves as the platform from which to explore cuteness and its social implications. The second case study in chapter 6 is of popular religious posters in Pakistan. It continues the exploration of cuteness introduced in the previous chapter, linking it to aesthetic and ethical concerns of beauty, goodness, and virtue. The final case examined in chapter 7 is that of parastatal visual materials in Iran, in particular children's books referring to the Iran-Iraq war produced by paramilitary organizations, propaganda posters, and postage stamps. In addition to issues raised in the previous two chapters, chapter 7 explores the ways in which gender

intersects with conceptions of childhood and adulthood, questions of martyrdom and sacrifice, and the connections between these important topics. Each of these chapters starts with a brief historical outline of the nation with a specific focus on the subjects under discussion. In all cases, the most productive point of entry into understanding societal attitudes toward childhood is the history of education, and this receives priority in my treatment over discussions of political history and religion. My purpose is not to provide comprehensive histories of the societies from which the data is drawn, but to furnish the minimum information necessary to create an informed context in which to frame my discussion.

The final chapter brings together the various problems and strains of thought raised in the previous chapters, demonstrating the interrelatedness of questions of age and gender, the idealization of children and childhood, the relationship between cuteness and innocence as well as between beauty and virtue, and the centrality of emotion, aspiration, and affect as sociocultural and religious forces.

It may be productive to think of objects as they interact with human beings across time not as having lives, but as possessing itineraries. The concept of an itinerary helps excise notions of an object possessing its own autonomous existence, and instead emphasizes the journey through which the object interacts with human beings in sociohistorical spaces. One way to understand the social role of the object is to conceive of it as an index, by which I mean a sign that points to something else.[51] Objects, and visual objects in particular, might resemble an intended prototype, but they can also indicate something directly or by association. For example, a fire alarm indicates fire, smoke, heat, emergency, and the necessity of exiting a building equally well. It also evokes emotional responses of fear and anxiety, and may trigger a flight response. The index certainly indicates something, but what that is cannot be discerned easily nor is it necessarily a singular thing; nor do we have access to reliable systems of deductive reasoning that assures us of an accurate interpretation of one value to the index.[52]

The lack of precise, causative relationships between observed phenomena and their affective consequences manifested in human individuals and societies is a frustrating problem that plagues this project, as it does the majority of visual and material cultural studies. I am relying in my analysis on a process suggested by Alfred Gell, believing that *abduction,* rather than *deduction, communication,* or *translation,* helps explain the agency of material objects most effectively.[53] In doing so,

I am emphasizing the phenomenon of object-agency and, secondarily, the dynamic relationship between human beings and objects. I employ the concept of *abduction* as a means of avoiding the trap posed by comfortable reliance on familiar modes of inference or terminology. By *abduction* I mean "to abduce," which constitutes the form of reasoning in which we can abduce a *possible*—but not an *actual* or *definite*—agent or effect. For example, if I see that a favorite plant in my garden is drooping, I can abduce that it needs watering. My abduction may be incorrect, however, since the agent behind the drooping plant might be excessive heat, lack of light or nutrition, a disease or a parasite, or perhaps even something else.[54]

In analyzing the role of objects and images in society—especially in the context of how they represent and elicit emotion and affect—one would do well to consider the commonality of objects within a theoretical framework that gives primacy to *agency, transformation,* and *causation.* My purpose behind studying the role of the visual object in relation to emotional responses is not to construct symbolic relationships between texts, images, and social forces, but to understand how human beings function in society. I remain unclear on whether visual and material objects possess extractable and stable meanings or even if objects have the sort of epistemic and corporeal integrity that would allow them to be contemplated, understood, and acted upon and through in a stable manner. Such questions of the extractability and nature of meaning in objects are particularly relevant in a study of emotive objects and their relationship to human beings at an individual and societal level. I address this problem through taking the preconditions for abductive reasoning seriously, and by directing much of my focus to the subject of emotion and affect, rather than the specificity of objects or people.

Abduction might seem like a less rigorous way of reasoning than deduction or others, but it has undeniable strengths and forms the basis of most scientific thinking. Abduction allows one to analyze and experiment when one doesn't have access to all data or causal relationships, this being the situation in which one finds oneself much of the time. Its efficacy rests on knowing as much contextually relevant information as one can about something or a situation before one attempts to abduce an answer. In the example of the plant above, it is my knowledge of plants and my garden, previous observations about the impact of the lack of water, knowledge of when last I fertilized the plant, awareness of the absence of pests, and so on that lead me to abduce that I need to water my plant. A similar system of reasoning can be applied to the

visual culture of the societies discussed in this book by accessing as much contextually relevant information as one can on each society, its national context, the impact of religion and education, and the broader structures, forces, and histories of Islamic societies in order to make informed abductions about the role of the visual culture of childhood in sociocultural and religious formations.

The second methodological window through which I contemplate my subject is to place emotion at the center of my study, shifting the focus from objects and people to the active agency of emotion, feeling, and affect. In a sense, this form of analysis treats emotions as objects of human manufacture (albeit often unintentional ones), and thus recognizes them as the location of human meanings and motivations.