Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East

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ORPHANS AND ABANDONED CHILDREN
IN MODERN EGYPT

‘Beth Baroni

Orphans stand out in Islamic writings as deserving of special protection; abandoned babies, by contrast, were an anathema in Middle Eastern societies, evoking shame not sympathy. The legal status of orphans and abandoned children differed, but they often found themselves in similar circumstances: at the margins or outcast from families, the mainstay of society. Care of orphans and foundlings slowly became a concern to providers of social welfare in nineteenth and twentieth-century Egypt. Ottoman-Egyptian officials, French and American missionaries, British colonial-officers, Islamists, and national reformers increasingly opened refuges, institutionalizing the care of orphans and abandoned children. But they had their own competing agendas, which politicized the issues surrounding the social welfare of these children. Questions about colonialism, conversion, and care collided in sometimes contentious debates.

Islamic inheritance law set the parameters for caring for abandoned and orphaned children, and was followed by both Muslims and Copts in Egypt. Legally, an orphan (yatim; pl. aytam) was one who had lost a father, his or her legal guardian. The driving principle in stipulations regarding orphans was the issue of inheritance, and the law had a great deal to say about the care of orphans and their property. Set by fixed Quranic shares, an inheritance could only be assigned to those in the blood line. The law thus clearly distinguished between those whose paternity could be established and those whose paternity was unknown or contested. The law sought to protect the inheritance of orphans whose paternity was known by assigning guardians and regulating their role, and a child of known parentage whose father had died would most likely be raised by relatives. The law, however, prohibited adoption, shoring up the notion of family as a set of blood relatives with a shared pedigree and leaving those whose paternity was unknown in a social wilderness, though legally they were wards of the state. Foundlings (laqit, pl. luqata’) were generally assumed to be the result of illicit sexual relations.
Legally they were not orphans as their father had not died. While the woman was considered to have disgraced the family by having pre-marital or extra-marital relations, the child bore the stigma of the act and was perceived to have “tainted” blood. Middle Eastern societies were not unique in stigmatizing children born out of wedlock and branding the mothers. Western societies had similar histories, and single motherhood became accepted only slowly and with resistance.

Since the social category of “single mother” did not exist in most of the Middle East, nor did legal adoption, what happened to the children of unwed mothers? The anthropologist Jamila Bargach writes movingly of the experience of “bastards,” as she consciously and provocatively calls them, in her *Orphans of Islam: Family, Abandonment, and Secret Adoption in Morocco*. One solution, which she traces in interviews, is secret adoption, in which a couple, longing for a child but unable to conceive or deliver (another social stigma for women), takes the infant from a mother who is unable to raise it for social or financial reasons. The secrecy in many of Bargach’s cases often unraveled at the moment of the father’s death, when relatives stepped forward to contest the “adopted” child’s right to the patrimony. (Truly secret or successful adoptions might not have been accessible to the researcher by their very nature.) Other mothers abandoned their newborns in places where they would be found or handed them over to institutions that had a program to place them in foster care. While formal adoption is illegal, a form of fostering in which a family gives the gift of care but not its name; is regulated by the Moroccan (and Egyptian) state; Those children who are not placed in foster homes due to vagaries of supply and demand—and the demand for girls is ironically much higher than that for boys—are raised in orphanages. Bargach captures a full array of emotions on the part of birth mothers, abandoned children, and foster parents. At the same time, she follows the work of social actors who serve as intermediaries and look for practical solutions, while she herself challenges state legislation and social values that perpetuate the quandary and the pain.

Orphans have been at the margins of the family and society as well as history. This essay will sketch a history of institutions established

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in Egypt to house and aid orphans and abandoned children. This is an attempt to get at those children who were, for a variety of reasons, excluded from the family, and see how society and the state dealt with what Bargach calls the "surfeit of bodies." Given the nature of our sources, which include stories and photographs in the Egyptian press, British colonial records, and American missionary and State Department documents, we learn more about government policy, social activism, and refuges than the children's and mothers' emotive experience of their condition.4

The Ottoman-Egyptian State and Social Welfare

In her Managing Egypt's Poor and the Politics of Benevolence, 1800-1952, Mine Ener has shown how the Ottoman-Egyptian state "managed" the poor in the nineteenth century, setting up new institutions to serve those who were not sufficiently provided for by the safety net of the family or by forms of religious charity. She preferred the word "marginalizing" to "policing," for she saw the poor as actors who pursued various strategies in obtaining relief, including seeking aid from the state. The poor are the subject of her book, but orphans figure prominently in the text.5

In pre-modern Egypt, the poor found multiple services in large complexes established by sultans and the wealthy through religious endowments (waqfs). Maristan Qalawun, for example, founded by the Mamluk sultan Qalawun in 1284, included a mosque and hospital. In the nineteenth century, the hospital contained an orphanage and foundling home which took in abandoned children found in Cairo's streets or those children whose parents could no longer care for them. As a religious trust, this foundling home and orphanage would have been outside the purview of the pre-modern state. But early in the nineteenth century, the Ottoman governor Mehmed Ali took control of religious trusts as part

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3 Bargach, Orphans of Islam, p. 213.
4 This essay builds on chapters by Amira al-Azhary Sonbol, "Adoption in Islamic Society: A Historical Survey," (pp. 45-67) and Andrea B. Rugh, "Orphanages in Egypt: Contradiction or Affirmation in a Family-Oriented Society," (pp. 124-41) in Children in the Muslim Middle East, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
6 Ibid., pp. xi, 26.
of a bid to augment his power and secure resources for a dynasty. His grandson Ismail later established the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which remained a contested fiefdom well into the twentieth century. The royal family legitimized its rule and aggrandizement of power in part by claiming the mantle of guardianship of the weak and vulnerable. At the same time, institutions for the poor, who in pre-modern times had found refuge in the multifunctional Islamic mosque-hospital complex, became increasingly specialized.

The Ottoman-Egyptian state started its own home for foundlings and the first rudimentary state orphanage within the new School for Midwives (Madrarat al-Wilada) and orphans were among the first students. The school had been established in the 1830s in the Civilian Hospital of Azbakiyya. Ener found an “extensive discussion of infant abandonment and admission to the Madrasat al-Wilada” in police records over the eight year period 1846–54. She estimated that the numbers of foundlings entering the school home ranged from one to three per month. She gave the example of an unnamed peasant woman who showed up at the police station in November 1846 with an infant boy discovered at a mosque in Gamaliyya, Cairo. Ener reports that mothers, fathers, neighbors, and others brought in infants to the police for placement in the new foundling home and orphanage when they could not nurse or care for them. The home provided infants with a wet nurse.

The orphans that Bargach interviewed showed a keen interest in locating the site of their abandonment. The child above was found in a mosque. Edward Lane, writing in roughly the same period, reported that parents abandoned infants on the steps of mosques hoping co-religionists would raise them, and he attributed their abandonment to financial difficulties. Other sources suggest that infants were abandoned at the doors of churches as well. But the mosque does not figure in Bargach’s list of “sanctioned spaces where the act of abandoning was done” in Morocco. She explains, “The mosque is emphatically a proscribed space, unlike Europe where the church was seen as the appropriate space for abandoning an infant.”

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house belonging to a notable, or the zawiya [saint's shrine] were more welcoming.” She also mentions public baths as sites of abandonment.⁰ Andrea Rugh’s elderly informants in Cairo remembered the practice of leaving newborns at the door of a wet nurse, who raised them with government or private subsidies until they could enter an institution.¹ Did the site of abandonment change as the state rather than religious institutions (or the state as protector of religion) came to control the fate of these infants? What were the changing perspectives of the act and its symbolic dimensions? Did an earlier tolerance on the part of religious or state authorities give way to rigidity or fear of prosecution? Were babies found at mosques quietly and quickly placed, thus averting the eyes of the state and historians?

Ener tells us that orphans were among those who petitioned for entry to the Mosque of Ahmad ibn Tulun, which was transformed into a poor shelter in 1847–48. There are cases of children seeking admission when a father or mother died; sometimes a relative showed up later, petitioning authorities for their release. One Hasan Ahmad, for example, admitted in 1868, stayed for two weeks and then was released to his brother. Mothers came as well, with young children, asking to be admitted when they had no support. These mothers may have been divorced, separated, widowed, or spouses of men absent in the army (for the petitions do not reveal what happened to the husbands).

Ener also found that “women may have used Takiyyat Tulun for the sole purpose of having a safe place to give birth.” In one year forty-nine babies were born in the refuge. Some mothers stayed months afterward, but lists of residents show “that this shelter also served as a temporary refuge for women about to give birth.”¹² One wonders about the circumstances of these women. Why did they go to a refuge to give birth? Was it to escape the watchful eyes of villagers or neighbors? Why did some leave immediately after giving birth whereas others stayed for the better part of a year? One can speculate that the refuge may have served in part as a home for unwed mothers who came to deliver and left quickly afterwards. What became of their offspring? Sadly, Mine Ener is no longer here to help us answer these questions. We do know that Takiyyat Tulun, which had served as a poor shelter for over thirty

⁰ Bargach, Orphans of Islam, p. 179.
¹ Rugh, “Orphanages in Egypt,” p. 130.
¹² Bargach, Orphans of Islam, p. 57.
years, was restored as a mosque in the early 1880s when preservationists reclaimed the space.\textsuperscript{13}

It is clear that the state increasingly took the role of guardian, investing itself with greater responsibility for the protection of the most vulnerable, whether these were orphans of known or unknown pedigree. Iris Agmon shows for Palestine how from the 1850s the Ottoman state set up an authority to administer a central fund for orphans (the Supervision of Orphan Properties) as part of a series of court reforms designed to strengthen its control over the court system and the judges who presided over the courts. An authority was established to manage the property and money that orphans were to inherit at majority.\textsuperscript{14} In Egypt, a probate or guardianship court (majlis hasbi) "to protect the well-being of minors," was decreed under Ismail in 1873, and went further than the Ottoman reform in secularizing the law.\textsuperscript{15}

At mid-century the state was willing to share the stage and supported French Catholic social welfare ventures, including the building of schools, hospitals, and orphanages. When in 1850 priests found two infants abandoned on the doorsteps of their church in Alexandria, they handed them over to the Dames de la Charité until the parents could be located; shortly thereafter, the sisters started a home for the orphaned and the abandoned. In 1860, they took in Syrian refugees and forty orphan girls. That year they started the St. Vincent de Paul Orphanage for boys who had been orphaned in the sectarian troubles in Syria. Subsequently, the sisters began a separate home for foundlings, calling it the Refuge of Saint Joseph; the boys and girls were separated and sent to separate institutions at the age of seven.\textsuperscript{16} French Catholic orders also established orphanages in the capital, Cairo. These included the Maison d\'ur Bon-Pasteur in Shubra in roughly 1869, and the Maison des Soeurs Franciscaines, which late in the century had 54 orphaned children and about thirty in the refuge for foundlings, the smallest of


\textsuperscript{14} Iris Agmon, \textit{Family and Court: Legal Culture and Modernity in Late Ottoman Palestine} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), chap. 5.


\textsuperscript{16} Ebre, \textit{Managing Egypt's Poor}, p. 103; Victor Guerin, \textit{La France Catholique en Égypte} (Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, 1894), pp. 54–61.
whom were with wet nurses in Bulaq under the surveillance of a sister.\textsuperscript{17} In Port Said, the community of Bon-Pasteur d'Angers established an orphanage as part of its complex.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{British Colonialism and Private Social-Welfare Initiatives}

The British had roundly criticized Ottoman-Egyptian elites for not providing adequate care for the poor. But when they came to control the state after the occupation of 1882, they curtailed the forays of the state into social welfare, only minimally funding education, health, and other social services.\textsuperscript{19} They looked instead to the private sector to provide solutions to social problems, giving missionaries, foreign activists, and Egyptian reformers a wide berth to launch and expand their own social-welfare operations. To encourage them, they handed out state subsidies in the form of exemptions from customs duties, train passes, and the like. Some of these ventures must be seen as joint ones, in which foreign and local social activists collaborated and competed in providing social services.

One such enterprise, founded by the friends of the first Lady Cromer, was a refuge for foundlings. The Lady Cromer Home, or Foundling Hospital, was started in 1898 in a wing of Qasr al-Aini Hospital (itself built by public subscription) to take in abandoned babies: In 1902 it admitted eighty-five children, thirty-two of whom were later placed in homes; two years later, the hospital admitted 131 abandoned babies. \textquotedblleft The mortality among these children still keeps very high,	extquotedblright Lord Cromer, the British consul general, wrote in his annual report of 1904, \textquotedblleft it is chiefly due to the terrible condition in which the majority are brought to the hospital. The mothers abandon them, immediately after birth, on some piece of waste ground or in some deserted building, and they are seldom found until after they have been exposed, in a state of nudity, to the weather for several hours.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{20} As Bargach argues in the Moroccon context, this sort

\textsuperscript{17} Guerin, \textit{France Catholique}, pp. 169, 174–75.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 208–209.


of statement indicts mothers for abandoning their newborns, showing little understanding of their plight, fear, and desperation. Moreover, she writes, such declarations about maternal accountability ignore paternal, and social, responsibility. Bargach captures the pain of mothers who remember how they felt compelled to give up their offspring, knowing the impossibility of living in Morocco as unwed mothers.21

The British saw the work of the Lady Cromer Home, which expanded to include dispensaries, as a model for future endeavors.22 Egyptians eventually claimed it as a local project. The journalist Balsam ‘Abd al-Malik wrote after visiting the home, that it “had been previously known as the Lady Cromer Home. The truth is that there is no connection between the home and that name, for it is part of Qasr al-Aini Hospital and is funded by the Egyptian government.” Egyptian notables also gave donations to fund its operations. In 1920, the Home for Babies, as it had come to be known, consisted of three rooms with forty-two beds; four nurses were overseen by an English matron and her assistant. An adjacent Birthing Home consisted of fifty-four beds; two Egyptian and three English doctors were on rotation.23 Wafid Khalil Agha, a Muslim women’s voluntary welfare association, was established in connection with the hospital to, among other things, find homes for the infants.24 That informal adoption took place in Egypt is clear from anecdotal evidence: Safiyya Zaghlu, “Mother of the Egyptians” and wife of the nationalist leader Sa’d Zaghlu, had as a teenager in the 1890s visited an orphanage and “adopted” a young girl who was raised in her family.25 Elites often raised orphans alongside their own children as playmates and extra domestic help, providing for the orphan’s needs and eventually arranging marriages for them.

British sources suggest that the number of abandoned children increased from the late 1800s, but more abandoned children were probably noted due to stepped up policing. The colonial state became

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increasingly preoccupied with older abandoned children, or “street children,” whom they suspected of criminality, and passed a law for dealing with vagrant children in 1908. The "immediate effect of this measure," wrote Eldon Gorst, Cromer’s successor as consul general, “was that eighty-one children in undesirable surroundings were taken off the streets in Cairo and Alexandria, and sent to the reformatory,” which had been recently built in Giza. Attention to the problem of street children was also possibly part of a British strategy to wrest control of religious endowments from the khedive, Tawfiq, who monopolized large charitable works, had eliminated the Ministry of Religious Endowments in 1884 and in its place created a General Administration of Waqfs, which was directly responsible to him. The British ostensibly sought to rein in khedivial corruption in administering religious endowments and at the same time win control over a lucrative source of funds. Under Kitchener, Gorst’s successor, the Ministry was reinstated, but the khedive retained a great deal of control over religious endowments, keeping a royal prerogative.

The Ministry of Religious Endowments had a medical section that oversaw four takiyyas, including Takiyyat Abdin, a hospice that cared for twenty-five to thirty-five indigent women, and an orphanage at Bab al-Luq. In 1918, the Cairo Orphanage for Boys and Girls at Bab al-Luq housed 96 boys and 35 girls, but few seemed to be foundlings. Rather, boys and girls were accepted in the orphanage “when it is established that their families are unable to provide for their bringing up.” The children received an elementary education, including instruction in reading, writing, math, health, and Islamic principles. Boys were taught industrial crafts and trained as shoemakers, blacksmiths, or tailors; girls were taught domestic skills and trained in cooking, ironing, and sewing. Workshops connected to the orphanage supplied clothes and similar items to medical and other establishments run by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. The boys also formed a musical band.

Dorothea Russell, wife of Russell Pasha, British commandant of the Cairo police, was instrumental in establishing the Brotherhood Waqfs and Stray Home in Shubra. By 1924, a few years after its founding, it

27 See Ener, Managing Egypt’s Poor, pp. 94–95, 102; Baer, Social History, pp. 83–84.
had some 150 to 180 boys. In a letter to Said Zulficar Pasha, a patron of the Home, Dorothea explained the links between the Brotherhood Association of England and Save the Children, which it had started. The impetus to start this Home in Egypt, Russell wrote, came from people who were religious minded and pious—the moving spirit was the business manager of the Nile Mission Press—but not, she adamantly asserted, missionaries. The committee running the home investigated Egyptian charges of proselytizing in the 1920s but found the accusations unsubstantiated. The boys were taken regularly to church or mosque services, whichever was appropriate, and attempts were made to give them Islamic or Christian religious instruction.²⁹

In describing the lines along which the Home was run, Dorothea Russell explained, “Nothing of this kind has been attempted in Egypt. It is run on the most modern and up to date principles of self-government by the boys, on character forming principles. It has been found in America to give results, to which nothing comparable is attainable under the old systems.” In a word, the “essence of it is an atmosphere of unofficialdom.”²⁰ Like boys in other homes, the boys in the Shubra Home learned industrial crafts, and the proceeds from sales covered materials and wages of industrial instructors. Yet for a time, due to under-funding of the home, they went out begging. The Waifs and Stray Home claimed it deserved state support equal to or even in access of that given to Malga’ al-Hurriyya (Freedom Shelter) because of its size and mission. “The class of the boys in this Home are [sic] a class that no other institution will take, the totally destitute,” wrote Dorothy Russell. “We contend that… it is the truly destitute child whom it is the business of the State to look after. The State does not do it, hence the crying need for this Home.”³¹ Segments of the Egyptian community supported the shelter, as evidenced by positive write-ups in al-Mar‘a al-Misriyya and al-Lata‘if al-Musawwara, with the latter showing a picture of the group and the orphanage committee.³²

³⁰ ‘Note by Mrs. Russell Pasha.
³¹ Note by Mrs. Russell Pasha.
As orphanages evolved into autonomous institutions in modern Egypt, some became single-sex. This had not been a characterstic of earlier refuges but seemed to be an innovation of colonialists and missionaries, following practices in Great Britain and the U.S. Were there more boys in orphanages and more orphanages for boys? Jamila Bargach found that in Morocco, social workers had a much easier time placing girls in foster care than boys due to anxiety about bringing a male into the family who was not part of the blood line. Boys, it was feared, might turn on adoptive parents and become violent. Boys also had to be kept segregated from female family members at a certain age, since contact would have been proscribed. Girls, on the other hand (as Iris Agmon has pointed out), moved in and out of families throughout the life cycle and might have been more easily accommodated at a young age. Girls were also sometimes desired—and exploited—as household help.

Missionary Efforts: “Saving Children”

Christian missionaries came to have a prominent role in running orphanages in Egypt. French Catholics, as mentioned earlier, had a pioneering role in this dimension of social welfare work, but they were not alone. There seemed to be plenty of business to go around. An Anglo-American Orphanage at Port-Said, center of a dispute about custody and conversion in 1908, was likely a missionary endeavor. The Swedes also started an orphanage in Port Said, calling it the Swedish Salaam Orphanage. (It too became center of a dispute.) The Dutch Reformed Church started an orphanage for boys in Qaliub. Noting the scarcity of orphanages in Upper Egypt, Lillian Trasher started one for boys and girls in Asyut in 1911. A Pentecostal from Georgia, Trasher ran the Asyut Orphanage (which was later named for her) as a faith-based institution for half a century. It grew into a virtual village, housing at its height some 1400 orphans and widows and proved quite exceptional.

alternatively as Malga’ Abna’ al-Shawari’a or Malga’ Abna’ al-Sabil. Malga’, rather than malia’, reflects the local Egyptian pronunciation.
The American Presbyterians’ Fowler Orphanage in Cairo can be taken as a more-typical missionary enterprise. And because the Presbyterians were rigorous in record keeping, a history of the Fowler Orphanage can be reconstructed from reports, minutes, letters, diaries, journal articles, and other sources. The orphanage must be seen in the context of an extensive network of schools, hospitals, and other social services built with the goal of evangelizing. The American Presbyterians had come to Egypt to convert Egyptian Muslims, Jews, and Coptic Christians to Protestantism and in so doing to “save” them. They emerged as the dominant missionary group in the Nile Valley from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.35 The orphanage was not the central institution of the mission or even a main one. Yet it was one of its most successful, since many of those who walked through its doors were converted and went on to serve the church.

Margaret (Maggie) Smith was the organizing spirit behind the Fowler Orphanage. Smith arrived in Egypt in the 1870s as a single missionary, joining the growing American group and spent the next sixty years in Egypt. After completing the requisite Arabic course, Smith, like many of the single woman missionaries, took up teaching, and shortly thereafter began directing the girls’ school in Harat al-Saqqā’in, an assignment she had for thirty-two years. The school grew to become one of the largest in Egypt, attracting the daughters of the elite, including those of ‘Urabi Pasha, the leader of the 1882 Revolt. Smith also organized women Bible readers, who visited homes within the quarter to read passages of the Bible to the illiterate and literate alike.36

For years, Smith dreamed of starting a home for homeless children. She found patrons in Esther and John Fowler, an American Quaker couple who visited her school in 1896. The Fowlers encountered numerous street children in Cairo and raised over $8,000 for an orphanage upon returning to Ohio. That amount was insufficient to buy a property and sustain a home but was a start. Smith and the American missionaries in Egypt began petitioning the Board of Foreign Missions, the governing body for the United Presbyterian Church of North America,

35 Heather Sharkey has a series of articles on the history of American Presbyterian missionaries in Egypt and is currently writing a book on the topic.

36 One Hundred Twenty Years of Service in Egypt: Anny Y. Thompson and Margaret A. Smith (a pamphlet issued in Pittsburgh by the Women’s General Missionary Society of the United Presbyterian Church of North America, n.d.), p. 10.
for permission to start a home. "The Board was not in the business of providing social services that could not be self-sustaining (schools could charge tuition and hospitals fees, but orphans had few resources), and it feared the expensive plan first proposed by John Fowler. Since the American missionaries were dependent on the Board for infusions of capital and personnel, they would not act autonomously. The Egyptian Missionary Association, the corporate body of American missionaries in Egypt, won approval for the plan when Smith promised not to approach the Board or anyone else directly for funds; the project would be faith-based with funds coming in answer to prayer. This did not mean that Margaret Smith could not write lengthy and colorful accounts for inclusion in the Annual Report and missionary magazines to spur readers to contribute.37

Although the Board of Foreign Missions did not provide direct financial support for the orphanage, it administered the home through the bureaucracy that ran the mission. The Egyptian Missionary Association set up a "Fowler Orphanage Committee" to develop a plan to establish and run the orphanage, which was named for the major donors. That committee was charged with submitting reports to the bi-annual meeting. These reports were in turn incorporated into the Annual Report of the American United Presbyterian Mission in Egypt. A careful reading of these reports reveals internal missionary politics and external social obstacles to establishing and running an orphanage in early twentieth-century Egypt.

Once authorized by the American Board, Margaret Smith began receiving orphans. These girls were to be placed in existing girls' schools and their upkeep paid out of the "Fowler Orphanage Fund." The first six orphans received were placed in the Fum al-Khalig School under Margaret Smith's care. Smith was officially recognized as superintendent of the orphanage. After a few months, better accommodations (the home of a deceased priest whose son was sympathetic to the project and whose daughter-in-law had attended Smith's school) were found close by and rented for the school and the orphanage.39 That home soon

37 One Hundred Twenty Years, pp. 11–12; Presbyterian Historical Society (hereafter PHS), Egyptian Missionary Association (hereafter EMA), Minutes; July 1904. The summer meetings were held in Ramleh, on the coast near Alexandria; the winter meetings were in Asyut.
38 EMA, Minutes, Feb. 1906.
proved inadequate, too, and within a few years, the missionaries were looking for a suitable property on which to build a new home. The project of a new home received a boost when Mrs. Arnold of Pittsburg left a legacy of $10,000 toward the building. Permission from the Board was still needed; but this time, Smith and her colleagues made a strategic shift and appealed to the Women’s General Missionary Society Board (WGMS) rather than the Board of Foreign Missions for support. They thus threw their lot in with the women back home, who took a greater interest in the project than the men had shown. In the end, they converted the old Austro-Hungarian Hospital in ‘Abbasiyya, which had been sequestered at the outset of World War I, into an orphanage. Bought for $5,000, it was renovated with $1,000, and the ‘Abbasiyya Girls’ School was added.

During her tenure as head of the orphanage, Smith pushed for expanded quarters, petitioned and updated the Board and “Friend Fowler” on details pertaining to the new institution, pressed fellow missionaries into service, and utilized the educational and health services of the mission to help her girls. Sitt Habishiyaa, whose name suggests she came from Ethiopia, served as matron of the home. Separated from her husband in the Sudan and with an infant daughter in her care, she found a home and job in the orphanage; her daughter died shortly thereafter, but she stayed on, mothering the girls in her care. As the home grew, and Smith grew older, she required more assistance. Smith appealed to the Women’s Board to name Ellen Barnes, who was already in the field assisting a missionary. Smith managed the home until 1920, when age, exhaustion, and failing eyesight forced her to hand control over to Barnes. In the interim and beyond, other women in the field, missionaries and non-missionaries, helped in the home. Americans generally supervised the mostly indigenous staff.

Prospective orphans were presented by family members or others to the committee and underwent a physical exam (toughened after one girl entered with typhus). A physician from the Tahta Mission Hospital was drafted onto the committee and called in to give advice. Those accepted

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42 EMA, Minutes, Feb.–March 1910.
for entry were also the subject of a contract outlining the terms. Within its first year, twenty-three girls had been admitted to the Orphanage; since six left, the balance stood at seventeen.⁴⁴ Six months later, the total admitted stood at thirty-nine with twenty-three remaining.⁴⁵ By 1915; after the move to the renovated hospital, numbers stood at sixty-three.⁴⁶ The orphanage fluctuated between forty and sixty. Over time it became harder to gain entry to the Orphanage, which had a limited number of spots (in contrast to the Trasher Orphanage, which expanded to accommodate new entrants): In 1920 fifteen girls entered, and six applications were turned down.⁴⁷ A report filed in 1937, to which we will return below, suggested that over two hundred girls had “graduated” from the institution. But it seems that many others were rejected at the outset or had only short residencies. Roughly one-quarter to one-third seemed to be expelled or left in the early years.

The orphanage opened with two Greek girls. The appeal of their widowed mother had strengthened Smith’s resolve to start the project. But that pair left within a week, taken by Roman Catholic priests, who, according to the report “had a greater claim on them.” There was some consensus among Christian missionaries that they would not pilfer others’ wards. Two Syrian girls, one aged three and one five, were among the youngest the first year. As Smith told the story, their mother had deserted their father, converted to Islam, married, and sent them to a Muslim school. Their father, in turn, had taken them from the school and brought them to the orphanage to be raised as Christians.⁴⁸ Many of the girls who found their way into the orphanage for shorter or longer stays were caught up in similar family feuds, waged between a divorced husband and wife or families of the deceased. Some girls were fatherless, some motherless, some had lost both parents, and some had both but were caught up in the drama of divorce.

Another category of girls were those whose mothers were “living a disreputable life.” How actively missionaries sought out children of prostitutes, seeing the mothers and children as particularly vulnerable, is not clear. (The proliferation of orphanages in Port Said, a busy port town, may be connected to a population of prostitutes.) Smith

⁴⁴ EMA, Minutes, Feb. 1907.
⁴⁵ EMA, Minutes, July 1907.
⁴⁶ Annual Report, 1915.
⁴⁷ Annual Report, 1920, p. 34.
complained when one Syrian woman reneged on a fee mentioned in the contract that she had to pay if she did not leave the child in the orphanage. Presumably the fee would have been a financial disincentive to reclaim her child.

In the first year, the girls ranged in age from three to twelve. These were not then foundlings but rather girls whose family members applied for entry. Only occasionally does a foundling find her way in. Smith describes one such girl presented to the orphanage in 1910: "[A] dear, dirty, half starved, cross-eyed baby girl was given to us to bring up for the Lord. What little she wore, even the tuft of her hair on the top of her head was cast into the fire...we call her Timmy for short." Burning clothes was clearly a measure to prevent the spread of disease at a time when epidemics still ravaged the population, and removing hair would have been a measure to prevent lice, but the extreme also indicates a desire for a clean start.

The schooling and routine of the girls carefully instilled Christian values. A day school was connected to the orphanage intermittently; the girls received their early schooling there and then went on to other missionary schools, which sometimes provided scholarships, for an upper level education. Their days were filled with schooling, prayer, and housework, which included sewing, doing laundry, cooking, and cleaning, from which was carried out by the older girls. In the 1920s, industrial work was added. The girls made silver shawls, bead bags, and garments for sale, and later dolls were added to their repertoire.

The reports are careful to note the religious backgrounds of the girls. In July 1907, of the twenty-three, ten were Orthodox Copts, three were Protestants, three Roman Catholic, three Greek Catholic, and four Muslims. In subsequent years, the reports mention Armenians, Jews, and Syrian Catholics among the residents of the home. The agenda of converting all of the girls to Protestantism and having them join the Presbyterian Church is evident. Each report details the number of girls expressing an interest in joining the Church, being examined, and undergoing baptism. The biggest prize for the missionaries clearly was the conversion of Muslim girls. But Smith was careful to wait until they

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49 Annual Report, 1910, pp. 63–64.
50 Annual Report, 1910.
51 EMA, Minutes, July 1920, p. 12; EMA, Minutes, Feb. 1922, p. 139; EMA, Minutes, Jan. 1925; EMA, Minutes, Jan. 1931, p. 12.
52 EMA, Minutes, July 1907.
reached their majority before accepting them formally into the Church. "There are now fourteen Church members besides two Moslem girls who were examined and would have been baptized if there were religious freedom; but as there is no such freedom they were asked to wait until they are older," she wrote in 1909.\footnote{Annual Report, 1909.} The next year, Smith reported, all six of the "Mohammedan girls" have asked for baptism but were delayed for instruction until their majority.\footnote{Annual Report, 1910.} The intent of the missionaries was not lost on Egyptians. In one of the early reports\footnote{Annual Report, 1910, pp. 63–64.} (1910), Smith noted that three girls had been withdrawn: among them "a dear little ten-year-old Mohammedan...stolen by her father and married soon after because he feared she might become a Christian" and "a Jewess...taken away recently—being stolen by her mother, also on account of the religion of Jesus."\footnote{EMA, Minutes, July 1923, p. 406.} That the report repeats the term "stolen" reflects how proprietary the missionaries felt about the girls in their care: \ldots

The number of Muslim girls who entered the orphanage, although not a majority, was substantial and grew over time. In 1923, fifteen of fifty-one girls were Muslim (29 per cent).\footnote{EMA, Minutes, Jan. 1931, p. 12.} By 1930, twenty of fifty-seven were of Muslim origin (35 per cent), with one placed in the orphanage when her father converted to Islam. Six of these were baptized, and two others asked for baptism. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the missionaries became bolder in baptizing the Muslim girls.\footnote{EMA, Minutes, Dec. 1933, p. 298.} The anti-missionary wave of 1933 caught those in the Fowler Orphanage by surprise. "We passed through four strenuous months," they reported. The stress was made particularly intense because they had six baptized converts plus fifteen other non-Christian girls in the home. Eight girls were "compelled to leave," returning to their families. "In spite of the exasperating conduct of some of our persecutors and the attempts that were made to enter our compound by violence, our hearts were cheered by the faith and loving forbearance manifested by our girls and our staff."\footnote{EMA, Minutes, Dec. 1934, p. 391.} The difficulties persisted into the following year, with more girls leaving under various circumstances.

In 1937, upon the orphanage's thirty-year anniversary, Ellen Barnes, who was to retire two years later, provided an accounting of the girls in
the home. The report gives the names, professions, and marital status of 69 of those who went through the home: thirty-one teachers in Christian schools, nineteen as Bible women, sixteen as helpers and nurses in missionary and other hospitals, clinics, and homes. Collectively, the girls donated hundreds of years of service to mission institutions. The missionaries had prepared the girls for lives in service as teachers, Bible women, nurses, and domestic helpers, as well as Christian wives and mothers. Barnes wrote, “about two hundred girls have found a truly Christian home and a training which has resulted in many of these girls going out into various lines of Christian service.”

The report does not show what these girls thought of their upbringing, how their education, upbringing, and socialization had prepared them for life in Egypt or, alternatively, whether it had alienated them from their own society. Bargach argues that missionary orphanages in Morocco left children feeling linguistically and religiously alienated from the host society. The report also does not discuss those girls who entered the institution but left, or were forced to leave, after a short period. What contributed to the “drop-out” rate? And where did “drop-outs” go?

The Fowler Orphanage, later renamed the Fowler Home, was among the properties passed on to the Egyptian Evangelical Church after the 1952 Revolution to avoid nationalization or appropriation. It had left its imprint on those girls who had passed through, on the women who worked in the home, on those who had funded and served it, and on its neighbors.

Civil Society and the State Strike Back

The inroads of the missionaries at a time when the state had provided few funds for social welfare projects motivated Egyptians to organize their own benevolent associations. Ener discussed some of the orphanages that were established for boys, including Malga’ al-‘Abbasiyya, an industrial school and orphanage founded in Alexandria by the Muslim Benevolent Society during the time of Abbas Hilmi II (1892–1914), and the Malga’ al-Hurriyya, founded by a group of activists after the

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60 Minutes, Jan. 1937, pp. 84–85; Programs and Needs, 1938, p. 28.
1919 Revolution. These were, she argued, part of a nationalist and reforming program that challenged both British and royal patronage of social welfare. Yet I would argue that missionary activity had a larger impact than Egyptian social welfare institutions were not only created as a nationalist, Islamist, or Coptic response to missionary and foreign enterprises; they were created in their image. The orphanages that emerged from the 1910s were specialized institutions set apart from hospitals or refuges, were often single sex, and incorporated an educational and training—industrial or domestic—component. Moreover, the greatest spate of orphanage creation occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, after the story of an attempt to coerce a conversion in the Swedish Salaam. Orphanage in Port Said stirred a national scandal.

Just as women missionaries took the lead in founding missionary orphanages, Egyptian women, who came to dominate social welfare work, started schools and homes for orphans. The school of the Society of the Fruits of the Union (Jam‘iyát Thamarat al-Ittihad) for orphan girls opened in 1914 with 75 girls of various backgrounds. On the eve of the war, the girls were organized into a scout troop. While missionaries sought to imbue orphan girls with Protestant values, Egyptian social activists countered with a nationalist paramilitary scouting creed.

The Society of the Egyptian Ladies' Awakening (Jam‘iyát Nahdat al-Sayyidat al-Misriyyat), an association with an Islamic nationalist vision started by Labiba Ahmad (1870s–1951) in 1919, took as its first project the opening of an orphanage. Labiba and her colleagues gathered together 170 orphaned or abandoned girls from the area around Sayyida Zaynab and opened a home in 1920. That 170 girls could so easily and swiftly be found raises questions about how they had been cared for prior to the formation of the orphanage. Not all the girls were strictly speaking orphaned. One of the few profiled and pictured had been abandoned when her parents divorced and remarried. Labiba Ahmad decried the ease of divorce, pointing to the price paid by children who

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62 Enet, Managing Egypt's Poor, pp. 102, 117–19.
64 Al-Latif al-Musawwara (4 April 1921), p. 11.
were excluded from new family formations. Labiba, whose work was "inspired by God" and a desire to "uplift the nation," vowed to raise these girls as good Muslims. 65

Tracing the girls of the orphanage is difficult as their testimonies are not recorded in the brief mentions of the Society in the press. Photos in al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya give faces but few stories. One shows a small child who accompanied Labiba on a trip to see off a friend sent into exile. Others show them marching or at the opening of the new workshop and institute. As Ener noted for the refugee’s for boys she discussed, before and after pictures were systematically taken and displayed. In this case, pictures of a disheveled group of girls upon their entry into the orphanage and a later picture of the girls ordered and neatly dressed were published. These photos are meant to illustrate the reforming impulse of the nationalists, which in certain respects was not that dissimilar from the civilizing mission of the Americans and British. Social welfare activists were promoting their own ideological agendas in providing care for orphans and publicizing their politics. The press coverage suggests that the nation should care for its weakest members, supplanting foreign ventures and augmenting royal benevolence, and that those Egyptians who created such projects deserved credit. Yet the significance of photos of orphans appearing in the press in this period—1910s through 1930s—should not be lost: orphans were moved out of the shadows and into the limelight. Although these girls rarely had names (only the collective orphanage or school is given), they have faces and are visible. For a moment, at least, they lost their social shame and were incorporated into the newly emerging nation, if not into specific families:

Islamist and other women’s associations continued to identify orphans as a group in need of care. Labiba Ahmad mentioned an orphanage in Benha, where “fate had prevented [the orphans] from knowing the affection of mothers or fathers.” 66 Zaynab al-Ghazali, an Islamist who in many ways was heir to Labiba Ahmad, founded a women’s association in the 1930s that in turn started an orphanage for girls. 67 Other elite

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65 For full references to the section here and below, see Beth Baron, “Islam, Philanthropy, and Political Culture in Interwar Egypt: The Activism of Labiba Ahmad,” in Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts, ed. Michael Bonner et al. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 239–54.
women started orphanages; but it could be a courageous undertaking, given the stigma around illicit sexuality and illegitimacy. Leila Ahmed relates in her memoir that her aunt Karima, "further added to her reputation for unconventionality when she founded an orphanage for illegitimate children. It was scandalous to men-like Grandfather for respectable women even to mention such a subject, let alone to be founding a society and openly soliciting funds from him and his cronies to support an organization addressing the matter." Numerous state and private orphanages were founded from the 1930s in Asyut and elsewhere to care for the Muslim children who at that time were pulled out of missionary orphanages.

When the Mabariyat Muhammad Ali, which ran an extensive network of clinics and hospitals, and the New Woman Society, which specialized in training schools, merged in the 1960s, the new group turned its attention and what remained of its assets after nationalization to developing orphanages and childcare centers. By the late 1960s, the number of orphanages had stabilized at 179, one-half of which were Christian; although Copts were a minority estimated at somewhere between 5 and 15 percent of the general population.

Conclusion

The mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of the institution of the orphanage in Egypt as a specialized site for caring for orphaned or abandoned children or those whose families could no longer care for them. Over time, the terminology shifted from takiya to malqa, reflecting a shift from general hospices to refuges or shelters that targeted specific groups in need (e.g., male or female children or the blind). The sponsors of such sites included the Ministry of Religious Endowments and later the Ministry of Social Affairs; French Catholic nuns, British colonial wives, and American Protestant missionaries; and local social reformers. In providing social welfare, the sponsors hoped to enhance their

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70 Rugh, “Orphans in Egypt,” p. 133.
legitimacy as guardians of the poor, to earn social and political capital, and to "save" children. Each saw orphaned and abandoned children as open to proselytizing, modernizing, and nationalizing agendas.

Children ended up in orphanages for a variety of reasons. Some were abandoned at birth; presumably the product of an illegitimate relationship. Others were placed in the home at a later stage, upon the injury, illness, poverty, or death of parents, or divorce and remarriage. Still others had physical impairments. In short, illegitimate children were excluded from the family, which was posited on descent through the male blood line, and other children were sometimes pushed out as well, particularly the products of broken marriages or dysfunctional homes or those parentless children whose relatives could not support them. Social activists challenged the stigmatization of orphans and abandoned children by promoting them as good citizens of the nation, whose responsibility it was to care for them, and by attempting to give them a political purpose. Children also continued to find homes through the practice of informal and secret adoption, sidestepping Islamic injunctions against formal adoption.

The care of orphans became increasingly bureaucratized in the twentieth century, as the number of orphanages grew. Legal changes reflected new procedures: a law in 1912 gave eminent domain to the woman who found an infant; in 1946, the finders-keepers clause was dropped, but officials still retained discretion in placing children; by 1965, all foundlings had to be brought to the nearest center or refuge, where the police registered the child, often creating a false pedigree of made-up names, dates, and time of birth. From the late 1950s, fostering or "the gift of care," sanctioned by Islamic law and regulated by the state, was increasingly promoted by social workers as the best solution for abandoned or orphaned children. Toward this end, the Ministry of Social Affairs established a foster families program, setting informal adoption in a bureaucratic frame to regulate the procedure and find homes for children without families and find children for families without offspring.71