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THE
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
OF CHILDREN

BY THE LATE

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THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

RELIGION is only a form of feeling. This needs to be distinctly understood, or else we shall blunder at every step we take. But I feel I have no occasion to go into any very elaborate proof of it, as most rational thinkers have become familiar with the arguments on which it rests. They know that religion is not the observance of forms and ceremonies, inasmuch as men may observe all these most punctiliously and yet be mere hypocrites and pretenders to the religious life. Nor is religion the belief of certain creeds, inasmuch as men have held parts of every kind of orthodoxy, and yet been most atrociously impious. But, as it is generally expressed, it is a state of the heart, of the feelings, a state of faith, reverence, awe, love, dependence, or fear, according to the character of the divine object presented to the mind. No distinction can be more important than that of this modern one between theology and religion. It is necessary to the interpretation of all the religious history of the past, and to all intelligent religious action in the present. Religion is the feeling which arises when a divine object is presented to the mind ; theology is the explanation the intellect gives of that object, its nature, character, and relations, the analysis of the feeling itself, and the exposition of the forms of expression or worship to which the feeling gives rise. So that it is quite clear that religion must precede theology in the order of time ; the thing analysed and explained, *i.e.*, must come before the analysis and explanation. And it is further clear that religion and theology may exist quite independently of

each other—*i.e.*, the intellectual process which explains is quite a different thing from the emotional state which seeks for the explanation. A man may feel deeply, and yet, through defect of intellect, be entirely without the theological knowledge; or he may through his power of intellect understand the whole question of the theology, and yet seldom or never in the faintest degree be the subject of the religious feeling. Bearing in mind, then, these distinctions, what is it we are inquiring into when we propose to ourselves the subject of a child's religious education?

By religious education do we mean the education of that feeling which arises upon the perception of a divine object? or do we mean the analysis and ascertaining of the truths or facts respecting the divine object of the feeling—*i.e.*, theology? or do we mean both the education of the feeling and of the intellectual process of its interpretation? Now, if I mistake not, the popular idea of religious education is wholly limited to the second meaning—*i.e.*, the learning of theology. Hence, *e.g.*, you will see in the prospectuses of various schools a long rigmarole about the great importance they attach to religious education, and the pains they give to it; and then, when you come to look into the processes by which they carry on this important work, you will find that it often happens that the sole effort they make in this direction with one class for a whole year is to instruct their pupils in the question of the Christian evidences! Now, I admit to the fullest extent the great importance of this question. It is one of the great questions of the day. In matters of theology, it is *the* great question. But it is not a question of religion. It is a question of historical criticism. And historical criticism is a science of recent times, and requires more learning, hard and dry study, power of acute and accurate reasoning, and maturity of judgment than any other science of the same class. To set children, therefore, to the study of the Christian evidences, and then to call this

proceeding their religious education, seems to me as egregious a piece of blundering as ever was perpetrated, and at the same time proves what I said—that in popular estimation religious education means, for the most part, education in theology.

I do not mean to say, however, that there is no religious education. On the contrary, there is a great deal of it, sometimes too much, and out of all proportion. But it is carried on, and especially by pious mothers, without any idea that it is education, and, consequently, without any thought or system. The only thing called and attended to as education consists of theological doctrines. But, in the sense in which I speak of religious education, it is the first of those I named—*i.e.*, the education of that feeling or those feelings which arise upon the presentation to the mind of a divine object, or, in other words, on the contemplation of the mystery of the universe—the education of the feelings of wonder, awe, reverence, love, and dependence. It is not forming our minds to the study of theological truth. That may be used as a means of religious education indirectly; and we may see thereafter that it is a means. But the religious education itself is the development, direction, and promotion of the growth of the religious feeling, the purifying it from gross superstitions and sensual elements, and rendering it elevated and elevating, pure and purifying, noble and ennobling. Now, by what process is this to be effected? I have already alluded to the means generally employed. Pious parents feel it their duty at the very earliest period to begin with teaching their children theology— notions respecting God, the soul, eternity—and in instructing them in the feelings they ought to cherish with regard to these objects. As soon as they can lisp, they teach them to say prayers; as soon as they can repeat sentences like a parrot, they teach them a catechism. Now, not only is this most destructive to the intellect, by teaching the child to use

words without a meaning, but it is creating in the child, so far as it awakens religious feeling at all, a merely superstitious religion founded on a false theology, which it will afterwards have to correct. It is sad to reflect that in most schools children receive to-day the same ideas in regard to the universe and the destiny of man which their ancestors entertained, and which are in direct contradiction to contemporary knowledge.

Let us take as an illustration of what I mean the first two questions of the simplest and the most generally used catechism for little children I know—Dr. Watts's. I have known it taught to children three years old, and, of course, before they could read; and have constantly heard it referred to as the very model of a manual for the purpose. And most certainly it represents the spirit—and very much of the letter—of teaching children yet in their early years. It begins with asking: "Can you tell me, child, who made you?" The answer is: "The Great God who made heaven and earth." Now, here at the very outset are two notions involving the most recondite and difficult ideas, which lie utterly beyond a child's comprehension. What idea can a child have of God which is not utterly false? What notion can the words convey but what is grossly superstitious? To give the word "God" to a young child without explanation is to teach him to use words without meaning—the greatest curse of most people's lives. To attempt to give him an explanation is simply to call his creative fancy into play, by means of which he will form for himself a most ridiculous idol. If you awaken religion at all—*i.e.*, feeling towards this misconceived object, this idol—it will be a religion as superstitious as ever was that of pagan nations. But then, in this answer there is another notion besides that of God, and as utterly incomprehensible to a child—that of a cosmogony—the generation of a world, of the universe. What are you going to say to a young child about God's making the

heavens and the earth? Will you explain, supposing you are able to do so? He could not comprehend. Would you leave it unexplained, and let him form his own notions? "Oh," you say; "who would think to teach a child your fine scientific ideas? I would leave him to the plain common-sense meaning of the words; every child knows what *to make* means." To be sure! You are quite right. A child knows what *to make* means, for he has seen your cook *make* pastry, or he has *made* mud houses in the streets; so he takes the meaning of *to make* as thus learned—the only thing he can do, according to the laws of thought—and applies the notion to God's making the heavens and the earth! Is that, however, the meaning you would have him take the words in? Do you think such a notion will produce in him any deep religion—that is, reverence, wonder, love, dependence upon him who has done for the heavens and the earth what the child knows he has done for the mud house made in the streets? It is all an absurdity together. If the child think and feel about it at all, it will be false thought and feeling. If he do not think and feel, he has learned to use words without attending to the ideas they represent.

Let us now go on to the second question in the catechism, recollecting we quote it, not merely because it is very generally used, but because it exactly expresses the spirit of what is called "religious" education where it is not used. That question is: "What does this Great God do for you?" "He keeps me from harm by night and by day, and is always doing me good." Now, the criticism upon this is very short and very sharp. In the only sense in which a young child could understand it, it is absolutely untrue. In the only sense in which anybody could understand it, it is partially untrue. God does not keep us from harm by night and by day, and is not always doing us good. He sometimes lets us get into a very great deal of harm, and sometimes does us a great deal of evil. "Oh, but that is all for wise and

gracious purposes." But the catechism does not say so ; and besides, whatever the purpose, harm is harm, evil is evil ; and, in the sense of the catechism, God does not keep us from the one and does inflict the other. What of truth would there have been in the answer if those children who lost their lives in the fire last week had repeated it before they went to bed? " He keeps me from harm by night and by day, and is always doing me good"—and yet to wake up in the agony of suffocation and a horrible death by fire! " Oh, yes," you say ; " but those poor children *may have been* saved from worse calamities by this premature death, agonising and dreadful as it was."

Ay! but to die and go we know not where,
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot ;
This sensible, warm motion to become
A kneaded clod.....'tis too horrible !
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

But, indeed, all the poets might be quoted in the same strain, showing that our human nature shrinks from death as the greatest of earthly evils ; nor could any sophistry persuade one that it were better to die the agonising death of those children than to live on in poverty. What I say, therefore, is that that catechism does not teach truth when it teaches " God keeps us," etc. He may have higher and wiser purposes to serve than we could comprehend ; but in our mortal state harm is constantly happening to us, and we constantly suffer evil. If, therefore, the child's religion be founded upon such teaching, it will be an erring, blind, superstitious religion. It will trust God for what it will not get, depend upon him for what he will not do ; and the consequence will be, if the child ever become thoughtful, he will have to abandon, and perhaps with agonising conflicts and doubts, all you have ever taught.

Having thus prepared the way, the next step generally taken in the child's religious education is to introduce a catechism of a more theologically recondite character. It may be taught at school or at home. But, with any notion of religion, the idea of training a child in it at school, surrounded by a large and restless class, and all the want of seriousness which belongs to children's nature, is simply preposterous. It is the work of home; of solitude, if possible; of quiet, if not sombre; but certainly serious circumstances. However, that is of no consequence now. Let the education be conducted at home or at school, it is generally most pernicious. The catechism most commonly used in this country (Scotland) is, as everyone knows, the Assembly's. Now, I do not speak yet of the truth or untruth of what it teaches—I speak of the capacity of the child to comprehend. And I know of no thoughtful person who would pretend that a boy or girl between eight and sixteen could comprehend the doctrines, philosophical, metaphysical, and theological, it contains. Again, I will pass over the intellectual injury done by teaching a child to handle words which convey to him no distinct or clear idea; and I simply ask, What is the result? It is obvious throughout society. Children so taught are not even grounded in theology—they are simply furnished with theological words; they, therefore, as they advance in life, easily become indoctrinated with that weak, watery, and illogical form of evangelicalism which has become popular in our pulpits during recent years, and which is infinitely more detestable than the stern, consistent, daring Calvinism of the catechism. The last is the system of men of strong, trained, logical minds; the first is pure fanaticism.

But, even supposing a child could understand, what would you have gained in the way of religious education? What could the knowledge of some 500 (as I have heard say there are) difficult questions of metaphysics, physics, philosophy, and theology do towards developing in his nature the feelings

of reverence, wonder, love, and dependence? Does feeling spring forth from metaphysics; emotion from philosophy; love from theology? Divine humanity, how thy history shudders at the thought! No, it is other things than dry, intellectual propositions which inspire feeling, and so long as you are occupying the mind with the propositions of the catechism you are necessarily keeping the attention from those other things. And then, when you add to these considerations the utter falsehood of the theology of the catechism, the gross and wicked representations it contains of the character and government of God, and the pernicious effect this, so far as it is understood and heartily believed, must have upon the whole character, one is forced to conclude that the so-called "religious" education of the masses of children in this country is altogether irreligious, and one continued misnomer and mistake.

There is one other catechism used, upon which I need here only make but a passing remark. I refer to the catechism of the Church of England, used in this country also, I believe, by the Episcopalians. As an epitome of theology, it is altogether deficient. It has the advantage, however, of being entirely practical in the body of it, and, therefore, immeasurably superior to the Assembly's as a manual for a child. But then, on the other hand, it begins and ends with the monstrous notions about the sacraments which place the system bound up with them on a level with the magic of the rain-makers of South Africa. I would rather, however, that children were taught this than to think of God under the awfully malignant aspects in which he is represented in the Assembly's catechism. I have already referred to the additions which are made to the religious (!) education of children in some schools by instruction in the evidences of Christianity, and in the same connection may be mentioned what is called Bible history. I have shown you that teaching the evidences is not teaching religion, but

the application of the science of historical criticism, and that, if it be done thoroughly, it requires a knowledge and a development of faculties no child can possess. And how Bible history could be thought specially connected with religion one would be at a loss to imagine, if it were not for that doctrine of inspiration which is now becoming rejected by all the more advanced of even the orthodox school. It is true that Bible history refers all events to the immediate and direct management of God; but so do all the histories of people in their ancient, barbarous state. In the early histories of Greece and Rome, *e.g.*, the gods were always interfering as much as in the early history of the Hebrews, and if this fact constitutes the Bible history religious, *all* ancient histories are religious. And then, while I grant that certain forms of religious feeling may be excited by some of the facts and events of Bible history, I must add, they are superstitious and erroneous forms, mostly connected with that doctrine of a special providence against which the whole experience of mankind protests. I do not say anything now about the intellectual mischief done by teaching Bible history as it stands; because it is not greater than that done by teaching the events of the siege of Troy, the wanderings of Ulysses, and the stories of Romulus and Remus as true history, excepting, indeed, that the sacred element mingled with the Bible history renders it more difficult to discern the purely mythical character of the narrative.

Well, then, when I consider what religion is, and what is the formal and systematic education given to a child to cultivate the religion, I am forced to conclude there is little of a directly systematic religious character in it; and that what little there is is of an erroneous character, only leading to mischief. Parents and teachers substitute theology for religion, and indoctrinate with a theology which I deem utterly false. But I do not mean that children therefore get no

religious education. Nature has been to them too bountiful for that, and begins their education in religion almost as soon as it is begun in knowledge. She surrounds the child from its earliest days with objects calling forth its reverence, wonder, love, dependence, worship, and thus gradually prepares it for the devout recognition of God. Spontaneously, Nature furnishes the child with all that is necessary for the culture of its religious life for many years. First of all, just as in the Book of Exodus Jehovah is represented as saying to Moses, "Lo! I have made *thee* God unto Pharaoh" —*i.e.*, by the miracles he enabled him to work—so Nature makes the parent God to the child through the miracles of power, wisdom, and goodness which the parent seems to the child to display. The parent, if of ordinary attainments and character, stands up before the child as a mysterious source of knowledge, wisdom, supply, protection, and happiness—incomprehensible to it, and calling forth all its wonder and faith, all its devotion and love, all its reverence and dependence. The word of the parent is infallible; the action of the parent is necessarily right. He has a seeming omnipotence about him, an irresistible will. What is there a little child thinks his father cannot do? What is there his mother does not know? For what of love will he not trust her wholly? Yes, a little child has nothing greater he could imagine to make a God out of than the parent. Nothing he could imagine (seeing it would be but an imagination) could by any means call forth half the depth and intensity of religious feeling the parent calls forth. Practically the parent is the young child's God; he knows no other, can know no other; and no other, simply by the knowing, could do him any good. And when the mother, in her ignorance, takes him upon her knee and strives to make him understand about the God she imagines, and is ready, perhaps, to burst into tears because her efforts are so much in vain, all the while great Nature is developing the child's deepest and

truest religious life through the trust and love awakened in his heart by the light and love which pour into his soul from her eyes. By and by, however, as the child's intellectual nature is developed, the perception dawns upon him that the parent is not quite so powerful and wise as he had thought. There are things he cannot do, things he does not know; trust gets disappointed, dependence is shaken. Then a higher object becomes necessary to call forth the perfect reverence and trust the parent can no longer do; and, generally, that object is found in the teacher. I would not speak with the same certainty with respect to the teachers of large schools as with regard to those in smaller ones, where the connection between master and pupil is more intimate. But in a well-ordered school a boy looks up with profound reverence and trust to his master, and regards him for long years as the very embodiment of wisdom and knowledge.

Here again, then, is the provision made in nature for the direct culture of the religious nature of the child—not by means of a dogma, but by bringing the mind into contact with real objects, which necessarily excite those feelings in the exercise of which religion consists. After a while, however, even the teacher's wisdom is found sometimes to fail, and his knowledge to have its soundings. Then the sceptical period in the child's mind is renewed. There are, however, other provisions as useful as these, which, at this later period, come into more active operation—I refer to the grander object of Nature herself, ever appearing more grand and glorious as our knowledge extends. From early years such objects make some impression on the child, and they would do more if he had judicious parents to guide his eyesight. But it is in after years, when science has interpreted the laws, the order, the forces of these objects to him, that they make the deepest impression and excite the deepest reverence, adoration, wonder, and dependence. It is then that inquiry leads to the perception of the grand and awful

mystery which surrounds the whole universe ; and the mind takes refuge from its exhausting, fruitless questionings in the conception of an infinite, efficient, conscious force working in all and by all. It is at this point religion and theology mingle, and the latter becomes of any practical service to the former. For when the active intellect has begun seriously to inquire into the nature and origin of those deep feelings which the great objects of the universe, its order, its mystery, excite, its answers react upon these feelings according to the attributes with which the answers clothe its conception of that infinite, efficient Force into which it resolves the whole. If that force be dealt with subjectively, and so have ascribed to it human qualities and affections, there results an imagined object which excites many other feelings besides those of reverence, wonder, love, and dependence, and which may degenerate into the lowest forms of superstition to which man is liable. But if it be dealt with objectively, then it remains the sublimely generalised conception of all the forces in the universe, and is known, worshipped, and adored only as it manifests itself in man and the outer world.

Now, this being the only form in which I can think of God, the course of the child's religious education seems to me very simple. It merely consists in leading him face to face with those objects which excite religious feeling. First, as parents, by the development of his own nature to the highest, preserving his reverence, wonder, love, and dependence until the last moment—which is natural ; then, as teachers, securing his devotion by the real resources of wisdom and knowledge we have treasured up in ourselves ; and then, finally, when both these fail—and even concurrently with them—ever lead him forth to gaze upon those wondrous objects of which physical nature is full, and those not less wondrous characters and events of which the history of humanity is full. And as he gazes and marvels, the deepest feelings of his being will be stirred, and he will

begin to wonder and adore. But wonder and adore what? At first blindly, and simply instinctively. But if this happen before his knowledge is matured, he will soon construct for himself a fetish. It is yours to stand by, and, by means of clear, intellectual light, beat down the fetish. And so, in the whole course of his progress, you must help him to destroy all the false gods he will create for himself whilst attempting to solve that mystery of Nature which makes him feel so deeply, until, at last, he come to rest on the only thought which remains for this and the coming age—a God who is the all-in-all, ever immanent in all that is, the one absolute force; unknown in himself and unknowable, but recognised and felt in the forces and order of universal Nature. To sum up, then, I say: Never attempt to give a God to a child until the child's nature asks for one. And then your work will be more destructive than positive—the destruction of his idols as he forms them. Leave theology as much as possible alone until he learns it in history. If, in the meanwhile, you would have his religious life be growing, reverence, adoration, wonder, love, and dependence becoming deeper and more habitual, you must not create for him imaginary beings by the play of the metaphysical fancy, but you must lead him to whatever is great, sublime, glorious, and divine in this universe. To that direct his eye steadily, and by the act you will place him under the influence of all that has power to inspire a pure, religious life.

