

THE
RELIGION OF CHILDREN

A DISCOURSE, WITH READINGS AND MEDITATION,

GIVEN AT

SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL,

OCTOBER 21, 1877,

BY

MONCURE D. CONWAY, M.A.

PRICE TWOPENCE.

ORDER.

1. Hymn 132—

“Smiles on past misfortune’s brow.”—*Gray*.

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“Gently fall the dews of eve.”—*Sarah F. Adams*.

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“Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill.”—*Tennyson*.

8. Dismissal.

HYMN 132.

READINGS.

HEBREW PROVERBS.

MY son, if base men entice thee,
Consent thou not.
Walk not in the way with them :
Keep back thy foot from their paths :
For their feet run to evil.
Surely in vain the net is spread,
In the sight of any bird ;
But these lay snares for their own lives.
Such are the ways of everyone greedy of gain ;
The life of those addicted to it, it taketh away.
Because they hated knowledge,
Therefore they shall eat of the fruit of their own way,
And from their own counsel they shall be filled.
For the turning away of the simple shall slay them,
And the carelessness of fools shall destroy them.

ORIENTAL FABLE.

THE learned Saib, who was entrusted with the education of the son of the Sultan Carizama, related to him each day a story. One day he told him this from the annals of Persia :—"A magician presented himself before King Zohak, and breathing on his breast, caused two serpents to come forth from the region of the king's heart. The king in wrath was about to slay him, but the magician said, 'These two serpents are tokens of the glory of your reign. They must be fed, and with human blood. This you may obtain by sacrificing to them the lowest of your people ; but they will bring you happiness, and whatever pleases you is just.' Zohak was at first shocked ; but gradually he accustomed himself to the counsel, and his subjects were sacrificed to the serpents. But the people only saw in Zohak a monster bent on their destruction. They revolted, and shut him up in a cavern of the mountain Damarend, where he became a prey to the two serpents whose voracity he could no longer appease."

"What a horrible history !" exclaimed the young prince, when his preceptor had ended it. "Pray tell me another that I can hear without shuddering." "Willingly, my lord," replied Saib. "Here is a very simple one :—A young sultan placed his confidence in an artful courtier, who filled his mind with false ideas of glory and happiness, and introduced into his heart pride and voluptuousness. Absorbed by these two passions, the young monarch sacrificed his people to them, insomuch that in their wretchedness they tore him from the throne. He lost his crown and his treasures, but his pride and voluptuousness remained, and being now unable to satisfy them, he died of rage and despair." The young prince of Carizama said, "I like this story better than the other." "Alas, prince," replied his preceptor, "it is nevertheless the same."

FROM "THE SPIRIT'S TRIALS."

BY J. A. FROUDE.

A TALENT, of itself unhealthily precocious, was most unwisely pushed forward and encouraged out by everybody—by teachers and schoolmasters, from the vanity of having a little monster to display as their workmanship; by his father, because he was anxious for the success of his children in life, and the quicker they got on the better: they would the sooner assume a position it had struck no one there might be a mistake about it. No one could have ever cared to see even if it were possible they might, or five minutes' serious talk with the boy, or to have listened to his laugh, would have shown the simplest of them that they were but developing a trifling quickness of faculty; that the power which should have gone for the growth of the entire tree was being directed off into a single branch, which was swelling to disproportioned magnitude, while the stem was quietly decaying.

. . . As to the character of the entire boy—his temper, disposition, health of tone in heart and mind, all that was presumed. It made no show at school exhibitions, and at least directly assumed no form of positive importance as regarded after life. So this was all left to itself. Of course, if a boy knew half the Iliad by heart at ten, and had construed the Odyssey through at eleven, all other excellences were a matter of course. . . . He was naturally timid, and shrunk from all the amusements and games of other boys. So much the better: he would keep to his books. . . . He was under-grown for his age, infirm, and unhealthy; and a disposition might have been observed in him even then, in all his dealings with other boys and with his master, to evade difficulties instead of meeting them—a feature which should have called for the most delicate handling, and would have far better repaid the time and attention which were wasted

in forcing him beyond his years, in a few miserable attainments. . . . In a scene so crowded as this world is, or as the little world of a public school is, with any existing machinery it is impossible to attend to minute shades of character. There is a sufficient likeness among boys to justify the use of general, very general laws indeed. They are dealt with in the mass. An average treatment is arrived at. If an exception does rise, and it happens to disagree, it is a pity, but it cannot be helped. "Punish," not "prevent," is the old-fashioned principle. If a boy goes wrong, whip him. Teach him to be afraid of going wrong by the pains and penalties to ensue—just the principle on which gamekeepers used to try to break dogs. But men learned to use gentler methods soonest with the lower animals. As to the effects of the treatment, results seem to show pretty much alike in both cases ; but with the human animal an unhappy notion clung on to it, and still clings, and will perpetuate the principle and its disastrous consequences, that men and boys *deserve* their whipping, as if they could have helped doing what they did in a way dogs cannot. . . . It would be well if people would so far take example from what they find succeed with their dogs, as to learn there are other ways at least as efficacious, and that the desired conduct is better if produced in *any* other way than in that. . . . On the whole, general rules should have no place in family education. It is just there, and there perhaps alone, that there are opportunities of studying shades of difference, and it should be the business of affection to attend to them. When affection is really strong, it will be an equal security against indulgence and over-hasty severity. . . .

I take it to be a matter of the most certain experience in dealing with boys of an amiable, infirm disposition, that exactly the treatment they receive from you they will deserve. In a general way it is true of all persons of unformed character who

come in contact with you as your inferiors, although with men it cannot be relied on with the same certainty, because their feelings are less powerful, and their habit of moving this way or that way under particular circumstances more determinate. But with the very large class of boys of a yielding nature who have very little self-confidence, are very little governed by a determined will or judgment, but sway up and down under the impulses of the moment, if they are treated generously and trustingly, it may be taken for an axiom that their feelings will be always strong enough to make them ashamed not to deserve it. Treat them as if they deserved suspicion, and as infallibly they soon actually will deserve it. People seem to assume that to be governed by impulse means, only "bad impulse," and they endeavour to counteract it by trying to work upon the judgment, a faculty which these boys have not got, and so cannot possibly be influenced by it. There never was a weak boy yet that was deterred from doing wrong by ultimate distant consequences he was to learn from thinking about them. It is idle to attempt to manage him otherwise than by creating and fostering generous impulses to keep in check the baser ones. And the greatest delicacy is required in effecting this. It is not enough to do a substantial good. Substantial good is often dry or repulsive on the surface, and must be *understood* to be valued; just, again, what boys are unable to do. . . Strong natures may understand and value the reality. Women, and such children as these, will not be affected by it, unless it shows on the surface what is in the heart. Provided you will do it in a kind, sympathising manner, you may do what you please with them; otherwise nothing you do will affect them at all.

MEDITATION.

As we gather to-day, apart from the conventional world of worshippers, we are still between those vast realms of moral good and evil which are reflected in all human consciousness. Beneath, stretches that abyss which human imagination has peopled with demons and devils, and the manifold tortures of souls in eternal pain and despair ; above, the fair realms of joy with its spirits of light, angels, cherubim and seraphim. But these are all within each of us. All those demons mean only hearts sunk low in selfishness ; all those angels mean hearts raised high in burning love. Not mean or poor is any lot which gives room to deny self, to put all self-seeking passions under foot, to ascend by the ardour and spirit of love. There is the grand conflict between angel and demon waged, the struggle between light and darkness, and there the victory is being won.

Great is love ! Whether it sends its sweet influence through a community or a home, whether it is saving a world or a heart, great and divine is love ! For it closes over and hides the dark region of guilt and baseness within us, it quickens the mind and expands the heart to their fulness of life. In each heart are the two doors—one opening downward to the pit of selfishness in all its forms, one opening upwards to the purest joys ; and it is when we give all to the spirit of Love that the hell is for ever conquered, and we build around us henceforth our eternal heaven.

THE RELIGION OF CHILDREN.

IN some respects the child living in the present age finds its lines fallen in pleasant places. It is not, like its ancestors, tortured with nauseous drugs, nor so much with the rod. The clergyman no longer pronounces over the babe at baptism, as he once did, "I command thee, unclean spirit, that thou come out of this infant;" nor delivers it up to be dealt with as if its natural temper and will were efforts of the unclean spirit to get back again. In Iceland the old people account for elves by saying that once when the Almighty visited Eve after the fall, she kept most of her children out of the way because they were not washed; on which these were sentenced to be always invisible, were turned into elves, and became the progenitors of such. But we are beginning to be more merciful than that even for the unwashed, and have gone a considerable way towards humanising them and making them presentable.

As to their literary culture and entertainment, there were probably more good and attractive books for children published in the last ten years than in the whole of the last century. Many of the finest writers of our generation—Dickens, Thackeray, Hawthorne, Kingsley—the list would be long—have rightly thought it a high task of genius to write books for children. But in religious matters the children can hardly be congratulated on the age upon which they have fallen. The child is a piece of nature—physical, mental, moral nature. Heaven and earth meet in it; the laws of reason are in its instincts as well as zoologic laws; and these harmonise in it. The child is a unit. Conscience is for a time external; it knows good and evil in the parental conscience, not in itself. There is no divorce between the two kinds of goodness—what is good for eye and mouth, and what is good for the soul. There is no fruit inwardly forbidden. Confucius said “Heaven and earth are without doubleness,” but Hebrew Scriptures say God has made all things double—one is set against the other. Our theology has been largely evolved out of this Hebraism, but our children live morally in that primitive age which cannot realise profoundly any dualism. The child, therefore, lives in a heaven and earth without doubleness; if its parent only consents to a thing, it feels no misgiving; but it is early introduced to a religion full, not only of double-

ness, but of duplicity. It is the gangrene of our age that it says one thing and means another; professes one thing and believes another; and nearly every child, taught any religion at all, is taught things incongruous. I used, in childhood, to wonder about the meaning of that prayer in the *Te Deum*, "Let us never be confounded;" but as time went on, whatever else was obscure, the confusion grew clear. Not only that old sense of a word which requires philology to explain; but the sense of every chapter in the Bible, every sentence in the Catechism, requires the interpretation of knowledge and experience; whilst the sentences being in English, apparently, the young mind is compelled to put some meaning into them—a meaning pretty certain to be wrong—or else be put to confusion. It is not, however, the double tongue of formal teaching which is worst; the mental confusion is not so bad as the moral; and there it is impossible to conceive anything more anomalous than most of the religious instruction—so-called—around us. It is the necessity of the home, the nursery, and of the school, that the child should be taught to be forgiving, gentle, kind, and never angry or hateful. It is instructed that all this is to be *Christian*. But just so fast, and so far, as dogmas can be crammed into the child, it is a system which begins with God's wrath against the whole

world, and ends with Christ's damnation of vast multitudes. A little boy in an American family with which I am acquainted, being in a passion with his playmate, declared that he hated him, and never would see him again. His sister rebuked him, told him that was very wrong, and not like Christ. "Christ never hated and abused others, not even his enemies." "No," said the boy, "but he's going to."

It may be that only one boy in many would be clear-headed enough to say that, but many can feel what one or none can say. It is impossible that children can be taught in one breath a vindictive Christianity and a gentle Christianity—dogmas of fear and principles of trust—and not imbibe either muddy waters of confusion or the waters of bitterness, where they should find only fountains of light and joy. In one respect the Reformation had an unhappy effect upon the work of nurturing little children. It transferred the care of "saving its soul," as it is called, from the outside to the inside of a head too small to manage it. In the Catholic family the drop of holy water and sign of the cross on the child's forehead are alone required ; and for many years it is mainly left to a natural growth ; at any rate, not encouraged to grapple with everlasting problems. Under the reformed religion there grew an increasing anxiety as to how the souls of the children were to be saved ; and the

way fixed on was to stimulate strongly its fears and its hopes.

Luther brought with him a bright children's paradise from the Church of Rome. Here is his letter to his son, aged 4 :—

“Grace and peace in Christ, my dearly beloved little son. I am glad to know that you are learning well and that you say your prayers. So do, my little son, and persevere ; and when I come home I will bring home with me a present from the annual fair. I know of a pleasant and beautiful garden into which many children go, where they have golden little coats, and gather pretty apples under the trees, and pears, and cherries, and plums (pflaumen), and yellow plums (spillen) ; where they sing, leap, and are merry ; where they also have beautiful little horses, with golden bridles and silver saddles. When I asked the man that owned the garden ‘Whose are these children?’ he said ‘They are the children that love to learn, and to pray, and are pious.’

“Then I said, ‘Dear Sir, I also have a son ! he is called Johnny Luther (Hänischen Luther). May he not come into the garden, that he may eat such beautiful apples and pears, and ride such a little horse, and play with these children?’ Then the man said ‘If he loves to pray and to learn, and is pious, he shall also come into the garden ; Philip too, and

little James ; and if they all come together, then they may have likewise whistles, kettle-drums, lutes and harps ; they may dance also, and shoot with little crossbows.’

“Then he showed me a beautiful green grass-plot in the garden prepared for dancing, where hang nothing but golden fifes, drums, and elegant silver cross-bows. But it was now early, and the children had not yet eaten. Thereupon I could not wait for the dancing, and I said to the man, ‘Ah, dear Sir, I will instantly go away and write about all of this to my little son John ; that he may pray earnestly, and learn well, and be pious, so that he may also come into this garden ; but he has an aunt Magdalene, may he bring her with him?’ Then said the man, ‘So shall it be ; go and write to him with confidence.’ Therefore, dear little John, learn and pray with delight ; and tell Philip and James, too, that they must learn and pray ; so you shall come with one another into the garden. With this I commend you to Almighty God—and give my love to aunt Magdalene ; give her a kiss for me. Your affectionate father, Martin Luther.” (In the year 1530.)

It is plain that the man who wrote that letter was himself a child. Thunder for the Emperor, lightning for the Pope, but a shower of rainbows for little Johnny. But that child’s paradise is now as obsolete

as the Elysian Fields, or the Indian's happy hunting ground. There was already a worm amid its blossoms while Luther described them: for Calvinism was lurking near, with terrors to blacken not only the earth but the blue sky. Happily for Johnny, his father was not logical, else it might have occurred to him that if prayer and piety were the way to reach the heavenly garden, they would naturally be the chief occupation there. But Calvin was logical; and there is no worse affliction than your logical man when his premisses are false. Calvinism made heaven into a large presbyterian assembly, all the children turned to rigidly righteous elders; no children there at all. One by one in the child's paradise the blossoms fell blighted. Instead of the dance, behold a Puritan Sabbath school; instead of plums and cherries, texts and hymns; cross-bows yield to catechisms; and the child learned at last that its heaven was to be a place where "congregations ne'er break up, and Sabbaths have no end."

Well, we have measurably recovered from that. At least, many well-to-do families have; the Puritan paradise is one we are generally quite willing to give to the poor. It is still largely the ragged-school paradise, and I suspect that endless Sabbath fixes in many a ragged boy the resolve never to go there. Meanwhile, for the children of a happier earthly lot, the fading away of the little Luther paradise has left them almost none at

all. Protestantism, with its education, has shot out into various theories of the future life for grown-up people. The Reformer hopes for a scene of endless progress. The Theologian imagines the supreme bliss of seeing his own doctrines proved true, and his opponents' all wrong. The Baptist's heaven shows the sprinkling parson confounded; and the Wesleyan will shout glory at the convicted Calvinist. "There," say all of them, "we shall see eye to eye"—that is, everybody shall see as we always saw.

But what has all this to do with the children? They do not care for the theological heaven, nor the heaven of endless progress. The learned Protestant world is so absorbed in the controversy whether there be any future at all, that it forgets the little ones who would like to know whether it be a future worth having. What is provided for them as the reward of their prayers, piety, and self-denial? They go to church; they read the Bible; they sit through the tragedy; but when they look for the curtain to rise on beauty and happiness, it rises on metaphysical mist, not by any means attractive or even penetrable to a child.

Since, for us, Luther's plum-paradise, and the Puritan paradise, are equally gone beyond recall, we may look at them calmly and impartially; and we may see that both have their suggestiveness, and point to a truth. Luther's letter is a celebration of

the child's nature—the purity and sweetness and even holiness of its little aims and joys. It is like birds singing over again the old theme—"Of such is the kingdom of heaven." But the paradise Luther promised his child was much too definite. He went too far into detail; and when little Johnny grew from the age of four to ten or twelve, and during that time had learned his lessons, he would see his paradise losing its summer beauty. By that time he might have outgrown the whistles, and become careless of kettle-drums. He might prefer gold in his pocket to a golden coat. He might find it, as time went on, impossible to stimulate prayer by a prospect of silver cross-bows, or even of yellow plums. And so leaf by leaf, blossom by blossom, his paradise would fade away; and it could never bloom again.

On the other hand, the Puritan paradise, with all its sombreness, did have the advantage of raising the mind to large conceptions. It was false—cruelly false—in crushing the innocent mirth and despising the little aims of the child. That which Puritanism called petty, was not petty. The boy at his sports is training the sinews which master the world. The doll quickens to activity maternal tenderness. It is said Zoroaster was born laughing, and a sage prophesied he would be greatest of men. That sage was wiser than the

Puritan. But it is not necessary to chill the mirth or to dispel the illusions of childhood, in order to keep it from the delusion of holding on to its small pleasures as if the use of existence lay between a penny trumpet on earth and a golden trumpet in heaven.

It appears to me that the true religion of a child is TO GROW; and when it is old, its religion will still be TO GROW. The child will turn from its toys; will return to them after longer and longer intervals; and lastly leave them, and turning say, "Mother, what shall I be when I grow up?"

If the mother only knew it, all the catechisms on earth have no question so sacred as that! The child that dreams of its future in the great world has already learned far enough for the time the pettiness of life's transient aims: it is already overarched by an infinite heaven. In the great roaring world, seen from afar, nothing is defined, nothing limited—it is a boundless splendour of possibility. All that man or woman may dream of heaven, a child may dream of the great world of thought and action into which it must enter at last, and find there a heaven or a hell. Religion can teach the child no higher lesson than that, nor stimulate its good motives by any nobler conception. As its sports train to manly strength, its little pleasures develop the longing for intellectual

and moral joys. And if the parent's tongue is not equal to the high task of telling the truth about the tragic abyss of evil to be shunned, or the beautiful heights of excellence to be won, there are noble books awaiting the child, the boy, the youth; ready to meet every phase of the growth, and follow every fading leaf with a flower more fair, more full of promise than the cast-off toy or pastime.

What a training for the child entering upon school-life are the stories of Miss Edgeworth—a training in manliness, independence, sincerity, and justice, which can make the playground the arena of heroism and duty! And there is Scott: the horizon grows lustrous with noble presences, as the boy reads. Dickens will tell him the romance of humble life; how kindness and sympathy can find pearls in London gutters, and scatter them again wherever they go. Plutarch's "Lives" frescoe earth and heaven with heroic forms that remain through life as guardians of conscience and measures of honourable conduct. Happily the catalogue is long—too long to be now repeated—of the good books which tell the young what brave and faithful men have done, and can do, to help the weak, redress wrong, uplift truth and justice, and make human lives melodious and beautiful amid the jarring discords of the world.

And the lives of noblest men and women have for

their dark background the evils they conquered, the wrongs they assailed; evils and wrongs which are the only real hell to be shunned. It is only the fictitious hell that terrifies the child. The snare set on purpose to injure it by a "ghostly enemy"; the dangers it incurs unknowingly, from an invisible assailant it may not avoid; these are the terrors that unnerve and unman. The *real* dangers of life, when seen, nerve the strength, man the heart, endow with resolution and courage.

The old man said to a child afraid to go into the dark—"Go on, child; you will see nothing worse than yourself." And that is the fundamental doctrine for a child. All the hells—their mouths wide open on the street—the seductive haunts of vice in all its shapes—they are the creations of human passion and appetite. According to what they find in us do those fell dragons devour us, or else feel the point of our spear in their throat.

And even so we make or mar our own heaven.

Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.

The little boy came to his mother, angry and weeping, complaining that in the hills some other boy had called him bad names. He had searched, but could not find him. But the mother well knew that other concealed abuser of her son. "It was," she said,

“but the echo of your own voice. Had you called out pleasant names, pleasant names had been returned to you ; and all through life, as you give forth to the world, so shall it be returned unto you.”

Amid these ever-present hells and heavens your child must move—onward from the cradle to the grave : why give it dismay or hope of heavens and hells not present ? Do not pour that living heart into ancient moulds and examples, even the best. While it has to thread its way through London, why give it the map of Jerusalem ? While it must live high or low in the nineteenth century, why bid it build for a distant age or clime ? True it is, that a noble and brave life is worthy to be studied, whether lived in the year One or One thousand or in 1877 ; but its nobleness is in itself, not in its accidents of time and space, not in its vesture of name and scenery. When a youth reads of the fidelity of Phocion, is it that he may confront Alexander, or withstand the follies of Athenians ? It is that he may be true and faithful in his relations to living men and women. If he fancies that it is like Phocion to slay the slain, and deal with dead issues, let him repair to Don Quixote, and see what comes of fighting phantoms and giants that do not exist. And if the life be that of Christ, the fact is nowise changed. That life is not yet written ; we have the figure-head of a Jewish sect, painted to suit itself, and

called Christ ; the figure-head of Gentile sect, painted to suit itself, and called Christ ; and so we have a Greek, an Alexandrian, a Roman, a Protestant Christ, each with its sectarian colours and glosses ; each an anomaly and an impossibility. There is no volume you can put into the hand of a child, and honestly call the Life of Christ. The time has not come when that great man can be brought forth as he really was, to quicken men instead of supporting prejudice. But where there is no prejudice instilled, the heart may be trusted to pick out from the New Testament the record of a valiant soul, the deeds of a hero, thoughts of a sage, death of a martyr ; and these too will help to idealise life for the young, and teach them its magnificent possibilities. Let the child know well that all it reads of Christ is true of itself. Let him know that all he reads there or elsewhere which marks that or any other life off from human life, as something miraculous, is mere fable ; and that his own daily life is passed amid wonders equally great, and conditions just as sacred and sublime. Ah, how sublime ! What tears are there to be wiped away ; what faces of agony to which smiles may be called ; what wrongs to be righted, high causes to be helped ; what heights of excellence to be won—summits all shining with the saintly souls that have climbed them, and radiant with the glories of which poets and prophets have dreamed !

That teaching which belittles our own time, and lowers our powers beneath those of any other, may be called a religion, but it is a moral blight and a curse. When we demand of our children the very highest aims that were ever aspired to, the very truest, noblest lives ever lived—nor let them be overshadowed by any names, however great—then shall we see rising our own prophets and heroes, and see our own world redeemed by a devotion not wasted on a buried society, by an enthusiasm no longer lavished on a world for us unborn.

HYMN 191.

Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins-of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood.

DISMISSAL.

South Place Chapel.

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BY M. D. CONWAY, M.A.

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