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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS CONDITIONED BY
MODERN PSYCHOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY

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So far as I see, psychological theory at present simply emphasizes and reinforces some general principles which accompany a practical movement that is already going on, deriving its main motives from general considerations. Psychology has no peculiar gospel or revelation of its own to deliver. It may, however, serve to interpret and illuminate some aspects of what is already going on, and thereby assist it in directing itself.

I shall endeavor to present simply one principle which seems to me of help in this interpretation: the stress laid in modern psychological theory upon the principle of growth and of consequent successive expansions of experience on different levels. Since the mind is a growth, it passes through a series of stages, and only gradually attains to its majority. That the mind of the child is not identical with the mind of the adult is, of course, no new discovery. After a fashion, everybody has always known it; but for a long, long time the child was treated as if he were only an abbreviated adult, a little man or a little woman. His purposes, interests, and concerns were taken to be about those of the grown-up person, unlikenesses being emphasized only on the side of strength and power.

But the differences are in fact those of mental and emotional standpoint, and outlook, rather than of degree. If we assume that the quality of child and adult is the same, and that the only difference is in quantity of capacity, it follows at once that the child is to be taught down to, or talked down to, from the standpoint of the adult. This has fixed the standard from which altogether too much of education and instruction has been carried on, in spiritual as well as in other matters.

But if the differences are those of quality, the whole problem is transfigured. It is no longer a question of fixing over ideas and beliefs of the grown person, until these are reduced to the lower level of childish apprehension in thought. It is a question of surrounding the child with such conditions of growth that he may be led to appreciate and to grasp the full significance of his own round of experience, as that develops in living his own life. When the child is so regarded, his capacities in reference to his own peculiar needs and aims are found to be quite parallel to those of the adult, if the needs and aims of the latter are measured by similar reference to adult concerns and responsibilities.

Unless the world is out of gear, the child must have the same kind of power to do what, as a child, he really needs to do, that the mature person has in his sphere of life. In a word, it is a question of bringing the child to appreciate the truly religious aspects of his own growing life, not one of inoculating him externally with beliefs and emotions which adults happen to have found serviceable to themselves.

It cannot be denied that the platform of the views, ideas, and emotions of the grown person has been frequently assumed to supply the standard of the religious nature of the child. The habit of basing religious instruction upon a formulated statement of the doctrines and beliefs of the church is a typical instance. Once admit the rightfulness of the standard, and it follows without argument that, since a catechism represents the wisdom and truth of the adult mind, the

proper course is to give to the child at once the benefit of such adult experience. The only logical change is a possible reduction in size—a shorter catechism, and some concessions—not a great many—in the language used.

While this illustration is one of the most obvious, it hardly indicates the most serious aspect of the matter. This is found in assuming that the spiritual and emotional experiences of the adult are the proper measures of all religious life; so that, if the child is to have any religious life at all, he must have it in terms of the same consciousness of sin, repentance, redemption, etc., which are familiar to the adult. So far as the profound significance of the idea of growth is ignored, there are foisted, or at least urged, upon the child copies of the spiritual relationships of the soul to God, modeled after adult thought and emotion. Yet the depth and validity of the consciousness of these realities frequently depend upon aspirations, struggles, and failures which, by the nature of the case, can come only to those who have entered upon the responsibilities of mature life.

To realize that the child reaches adequacy of religious experience only through a succession of expressions which parallel his own growth, is a return to the ideas of the New Testament: “When I was a child I spoke as a child; I understood—or looked at things—as a child; I thought—or reasoned about things—as a child.” It is to return to the idea of Jesus, of the successive stages through which the seed passes into the blade and then into the ripening grain. Such differences are distinctions of kind of quality, not simply differences of capacity. Germinating seed, growing leaf, budding flower, are not miniature fruits reduced in bulk and size. The attaining of perfect fruitage depends upon not only allowing, but encouraging, the expanding life to pass through stages which are natural and necessary for it.

To attempt to force prematurely upon the child either the mature ideas or the spiritual emotions of the adult is to run the risk of a fundamental danger, that of forestalling future deeper experiences which might otherwise in their season become personal realities to him. We may make the child familiar with the form of the soul’s great experiences of sin and of reconciliation and peace, of discord and harmony of the individual with the deepest forces of the universe, before there is anything in his own needs or relationships in life which makes it possible for him to interpret or to realize them.

So far as this happens, certain further defects or perversions are almost sure to follow. First, the child may become, as it were, vulgarly *blasé*. The very familiarity with the outward form of these things may induce a certain distaste for further contact with them. The mind is exhausted by an excessive early familiarity, and does not feel the need and possibility of further growth which always implies novelty and freshness—some experience which is uniquely new, and hitherto untraversed by the soul. Second, this excessive familiarity may breed, if not contempt, at least flippancy and irreverence. Third, this premature acquaintance with matters which are not really understood or vitally experienced is not without effect in promoting skepticism and crises of frightful doubt. It is a serious moment when an earnest soul wakes up to the fact that it has been passively accepting and reproducing ideas and feelings which it now recognizes are not a vital part of its own being. Losing its hold on the form in which the spiritual truths have been embodied, their very substance seems also to be slipping away. The person is plunged into doubt and bitterness regarding the reality of all things which lie beyond his senses, or regarding the very worth of life itself.

Doubtless the more sincere and serious persons find their way through, and come to some readjustment of the fundamental conditions of life by which they re-attain a working spiritual faith. But even such persons are likely to carry with them scars from the struggles through which they have passed. They have undergone a shock and upheaval from which every youth ought, if possible, to be spared, and which the due observance of the conditions of growth would avoid.

There is some danger that we shall come to regard as perfectly normal phenomena of adolescent life certain experiences which are in truth only symptoms of maladjustment resulting from the premature fixation of intellectual and emotional habits in the earlier years of childhood. Youth, as distinct from childhood, is doubtless the critical time in spiritual experience; but it would be a calamity to exaggerate the differences, and to fail to insist upon the more fundamental principle of continuity of development.

In other cases there does not seem to be enough fundamental seriousness; or else the youth lives in more distracting circumstances. So, after a brief period of doubt, he turns away, somewhat calloused, to live on the plane of superficial interests and excitements of the world about him. When none of these extreme evils result, yet something of the bloom of later experience is rubbed off; something of its richness is missed because the individual has been introduced to its form before he can possibly grasp its deeper significance. Many persons whose religious development has been comparatively uninterrupted, find themselves in the habit of taking for granted their own spiritual life. They are so thoroughly accustomed to certain forms, emotions, and even terms of expression, that their experience becomes conventionalized. Religion is a part of the ordinances and routine of the day rather than a source of inspiration and renewing of power. It becomes a matter of conformation rather than of transformation.

Accepting the principle of gradual development of religious knowledge and experience, I pass on to mention one practical conclusion: the necessity of studying carefully the whole record of the growth, in individual children during their youth, of instincts, wants, and interests from the religious point of view. If we are to adapt successfully our methods of dealing with the child to his current life experience, we have first to discover the facts relating to normal development. The problem is a complicated one. Child-study has made a beginning, but only a beginning. Its successful prosecution requires a prolonged and co-operative study. There are needed both a large inductive basis in facts, and the best working tools and methods of psychological theory. Child-psychology in the religious as in other aspects of experience will suffer a setback if it becomes separated from the control of the general psychology of which it is a part. It will also suffer a setback if there is too great haste in trying to draw at once some conclusion as to practice from the control of the general psychology of which it is a part. It will also suffer a setback if there is too great haste in trying to draw at once some conclusion as to practice from every new set of facts discovered. For instance, while many of the data that have been secured regarding the phenomena of adolescence are very important in laying down base lines for further study, it would be a mistake to try immediately to extract from these facts a series of general principles regarding either the instruction or education of youth from the religious point of view. The material is still too scanty. It has not as yet been checked up by an extensive study of youth under all kinds of social and religious environments. The negative and varying instances have been excluded rather than utilized. In many cases we do not know whether our facts are to be interpreted as causes or effects; or, if they are effects, we do not know how far they are normal accompaniments of psychical growth, or more or less pathological results of external social conditions.

This word of caution, however, is not directed against the child-study in itself. Its purport is exactly the opposite: to indicate the necessity of more, and much more of it. It will be necessary to carry on the investigation in a co-operative way. Only a large number of inquirers working at the same general question, under different circumstances, and from different points of view, can reach satisfactory results. If a Convention like this were to take steps to initiate and organize a movement for this sort of study, it would mark the dawn of a new day in religious education. Such a movement could provide the facts necessary for a positive basis of a constructive movement; and would at the same time obviate the danger of a one-sided, premature

generalization from crude and uncertain facts.

I make no apology for concluding with a practical suggestion of this sort. The title of my address, "The Relation of Modern Psychology to Religious Education," conveys in and of itself a greater truth than can be expressed in any remarks that I might make. The title indicates that it is possible to approach the subject of religious instruction in the reverent spirit of science, making the same sort of study of this problem that is made of any other educational problem. If methods of teaching, principles of selecting and using subject-matter, in all supposedly secular branches of education, are being subjected to careful and systematic scientific study, how can those interested in religion—and who is not?—justify neglect of the most fundamental of all educational questions, the moral and religious?