

1915

# Childhood religion: its essence and appropriate manifestations

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*"Childhood Religion: Its Essence and Its  
Appropriate Manifestation"*

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Senior Thesis.

alprone.<sup>^</sup>  
H.C.S.

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Outline.

*"Childhood Religion: Its Essence and Its  
Appropriate Manifestation"*

(A). *Its Essence: A rich natural religious experience  
is normal to childhood.*

1. The child is naturally religious.
2. The child should have a religious experience  
but one that is normal; one fitted to his  
years.

(B). *The child's religion must have an appropriate  
manifestation.*

1. His experiences seek expression.
2. It is through exercise that he works out  
the religious side of his nature.

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(A). A rich natural religious experience is normal to childhood.

1. The child is naturally religious. He does not have to be "broken in" or even broken at all, in order to be a worshipper unless he has been spoiled at the very outset. Religion when sanely conceived has no artificial cast. It is not something superimposed upon child nature. No pulling out of shape or gravely altering his little mind or body is necessary. It fits him as perfectly as light fits this universe.

The naturalness of a child being religious is perhaps best seen when its opposite is substituted. What do men and women think of the child who curses and swears; one from whose lips oaths and profanity issue; a youth with an obscene word and imaginations unholy? We are shocked and horrified at its awfulness - its unnaturalness. Not only this, but if it is allowed to run its course he is headed not for respectable society but for that of the criminal and the incompetent. Ungodly people will be disgusted with him even. He forfeits all trust and character.

The question may well be asked: In what sense can a child be religious? It cannot recognize itself as such for this would require a knowledge and understanding that it does not have. Meanings of words and terms as well as power of abstraction, judgement, and generalization are beyond a child's capacity. Its simple life and outlook are not fitted for a definite or an elaborate set of religious ideas. Later study and reflection bring these. A child would be overwhelmed with hard terms such as, omnipresence, omnipotence, eternity, spirituality, etc. The ideas back of these words are all vague to the young mind. He has little occasion to consider them.

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What little thought he does give to them is generally unsound. His ideas are often incorrectly conceived on the great subjects. It is here says Rishell that "the deniers of religion in children find their chief support!" If religion depended upon perfect conceptions children could not be religious, but would not everybody else be barred out as well?

Says Starbuck: "Religion is distinctively external to the child rather than something which possesses inner significance." He may when young be taught doctrines and accept them without either question or interest. What form his religion should take will depend much upon his years. As he approaches maturity, it ought gradually to approximate that of the adult. Real spiritual insight is only attained when there is a certain mental grasp. Not all who are forty have this in large measure. It is denied the child outright, <sup>yet</sup> he can live by faith and trust, while this is true.

Coe puts it this way: "Religion is universal. It is native to the human mind. The processes of the adjustment of the self to the world begin very soon after birth if not at once. He acquires ideas chiefly through the putting forth of his powers. Very soon three factors, a world, a self, and a demand become dimly explicit." Until they do it has seemed impossible so far to get any accurate scientific knowledge.

The young have a religious nature which is primitive and child-like, but none the less definite, present and real. It is the racial inheritance of all as fear and anger are. Childhood religion is individualistic rather than social. He measures its value by the personal benefits that result from it. Under six years of age the religious life is vague and not well defined. It is lacking in such religious emotions as, sympathy, humility, self-sacrifice, mercy, repentance, and forgiveness.

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The most marked feature that it has is a great credulity. It accepts without question perhaps because it must. We can see by this great differences between youth and maturity. Horne has well stated it when he says that children are not little men and women. But in germ they have that from which all later development springs. While religion shows dependence on parents and elders, it also shows the positive qualities of love, and obedience. Fears are common now but those of a religious nature are not so strong as they often become a few years later. The sense of right and wrong germinates early, and normally grows in proportions for years. It is one of the most potent factors however in childhood religion.

Later childhood grows out of early religion as surely as one story of a building rises out of and above another. New parts are added as they are needed. Imitation of elders becomes more pronounced. Suggestion is acted upon. Customs and habits strengthen. There is still an emphasis upon externals. Obedience when rightly trained develops into recognition of law, and order, and authority. These years are not always consistent ones. Principles of conduct may be accepted even if contradictory. Later childhood is still credulous, accepts miracles and the mythological. It is devoted to form. The more elaborate this is the better. There are in this period premonitions of deep religious stirrings which are to be so much a part of adolescence. The child's soul is on the eve of awakening.

2. The child should have a religious experience that is natural and fitted to its years. We are told that in certain monarchies they have a custom when the ruler dies of selecting at once his successor and of ~~then~~ proclaiming it to the populace by shouting: "The king is dead. Long live the king." We must make about such a declaration about the child having a "religious experience". We may say with all positiveness that the child has no business to have a religious experience. Then follow this up at once with the declaration that he has all the business in the world to have one; In fact as good a right to one as any grown up has. All that we need to ask is that it be natural and a child's experience. It is possible to be so alarmed for fear that the child may have an experience that when he grows to twelve or fourteen years old he will never know he has been religious. He may have attended church and Sunday School all his life and have a perfect record and yet have to be convinced that he actually is not Satan's property. Take an illustration cited by William Henry Roberts; "A man who had been governor of one of the great states of the union heard, when he was over sixty years of age, a sermon on the relation of the children of christian parents to the church. He thought upon the whole subject carefully, then appeared before the session of the Presbyterian church of the city in which he resided. When they asked him when he became a christian, he replied that he was a child of christian parents; that he had been carefully trained in youth; that as a man he had been faithful in all duty as a member of the congregatoin; that a certain visiting minister had preached a sermon on the relation of ~~christian~~ children to the church not long previous and that after careful thought he had come to the conclusion that he had been a christian since early youth. 'My <sup>out</sup> one regret, he added, 'is that I have been left to find the fact until I am over sixty years of age.' "

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Religious experience in an early day was what he had needed. He had been religious all the time but had lacked the religious consciousness. What nonsense to say that a child is naturally religious but must have no religious experience. One might as well say a child naturally gets hungry but must have no experience with it. When the child gets hungry you might call it something else as so many are ready to do with his God craving. I have a little village church where a refusal has come from three different families to let their children unite with the society on the ground that they are not old enough to really know what they are about. In reality it is the parents who are not wise enough to know what they are about. Each one of the children is of high school age and standing.

The thought that a child should not have a religious experience has begot the idea that a child can be too religious. A child might possibly become unbalanced on the subject of religion as I have known men to be. What is necessary is a proper understanding of the saneness of religion. It does not consist in having the hands folded all the time or in praying from morning<sup>un</sup><sub>A</sub> till night. If it did then christian people would be of all men most miserable. A religious child would be abnormal. A child can begin loving its parents at a very early age, why can it not as well learn to love God? There is nothing that blocks the childish regard which does not oppose those who are older, even more strongly. The child is naturally religious and needs to be normally religious. God's will concerning the young heart must be given free reign. Life should be a continuous growth in love and service. This is the ideal which ought to become real. Better than I can state it, Alover of children has said: "To become sensible of oneness with the Divine heart



before any sense of separation has been felt,--this is surely the most beautiful way for a child to find God." The hot-house process of over-pressure is not to be entertained for a moment. He is simply to grow into his own. Anxiety, haste, impatience, every hand is raised against them. Let the child know that he is God's child and he will be His. But as to his experience, we may take our choice between a religious one, and one which is irreligious.

The child's experience ought to <sup>be</sup> one which if he could tell, would be the equal of that of any of the grown up folks. Language for testimony is the invention for those of advanced years. It cannot possibly do the child's experience justice. It is rather too much for him to manipulate. Yet he has his beliefs, his certainties, his creeds of beautiful simplicity and faith: so we might go down the list. They are all childish things like his toys, but they would be full of interest could we know them. They are not identical with ours, but who would despise them on that account? It was with Samuel, the child, that God spake. If God knows the language of childhood, was not that as normal a thing as when he has spoken to those who are older? Jesus, the great teacher, represented to His disciples that the child's approach to the world's Savior is not to be forbidden, but the way to be opened. The same little feet that carry him to his nursery, may take him to the redeemer's side. The child lives almost at the door of the supernatural world. He is intimate with an external being which ~~he~~ calls God. A God it is in a human form, in the clouds or in the sky, or hovering near it. Starbuck says: "The relationship of the child and God is not one of fear or awe so much as one of intimacy, a relationship of love and trust." I wonder if there are not possibilities here that are not being

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realized. Bishop Quayle <sup>has reminded us</sup> that many ministers too lightly esteem the child. Perhaps this is because the child's religious experience and position are not appreciated. He was once present at a Sacramental Supper, where at the Lord's table knelt all such as were children of God. Beside a certain father knelt his little girl; and the ministering man passed the elements to the father, but passed the elements by the child; - and there the little girl knelt and wept at the Lord's table with a broken heart, sobbing to the father when they had risen from the Lord's table, where she had not been a guest, 'Papa do I not belong to Christ?' ". Twenty centuries with Christ's word should have taught all better than this. Jesus was speaking of children when He said: "of such is the kingdom of heaven!"

This is far from saying that there should be practically the same type of religious experience in persons of all ages. It is not a fine thing when a child of six or even ten years passes through paroxysms of repentance and conversion. It has nothing to do with so repent from or grieve over. The conversions of children have not always been sensible, but the same charge may be placed against others. Some people have no doubt passed through the agony external, because like mourning at a funeral, they thought it was the proper thing to do. Beecher observed that when people <sup>have</sup> found that they had been going the wrong direction, they did not go through a paroxysm, but turned around and went the other way. Conversion, if it is necessary in the child may be as sensible as that.

The child's experience with religion should not be an unfortunate one. What his is, will depend so much on this. Generally the little village skeptic had when he was a boy an unfortunate <sup>type of</sup> religious surrounding. I have in mind now the case of a professed atheist who when

a young lad was intensely religious. But an Episcopal rector in whom he had unlimited confidence shattered all his beliefs, it would seem forever, by disgracing the ministry. This same man now has three sons and each one taught by their father lives in a world over which there is no God. "If anyone should ask me", says Bishop McCabe, "what most impressed me in my boyhood days, I would answer, The sight of my father coming out from the secret place of prayer every day at noon." How many children who never know an experience with such a father, yet it ought to be every child's right. It is fundamental for normal growth. That very successful lay missionary among the depraved classes of New York city, Jerry McAuley, stated more than once that he never knew a man permanently converted unless he had a good mother. His experience shows the power of influence even more than that of heredity. The hallowed influence of "reverent worship, the prayers and songs of God's house, its solemn sacraments, its music, its beautiful windows and stately architecture - most of all, its quiet devotion of the family altar - all these enter into the very ~~seal~~ making of his soul" (Weigle). There is such a thing as a child having too tame a religious experience. It might well have some <sup>element</sup> that would impress him as McCabe's had. Some churches are too plain - their windows not beautiful, the songs poorly sung. I have read that "in his famous story of archery, Virgil represents Acastes as shooting his arrow with such force that it took fire as it flew and went up into the air all aflame thus opening a pathway of light into the heavens". If zeal was imparted to the child's religion so that instead of being a thing without life, it might break into a flame, there would be fewer old folks with religion so perfectly under control. There would be more church workers and better ones.

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(B).The child's religion must have an appropriate manifestation.

His experiences seek expression. Martin Luther once said: "A child shut up without play is like a tree that ought to bear fruit but is planted in a flower-pot." The child must through exercise work out the religious side of his nature. We have seen this need for adults for a long time, while many have completely overlooked it in children. As with older folks testimonies, church going, religious reading, christian work, etc., must give expression to the way they feel, so the religious side of the youths nature needs attention. But he may do different things and must do them in a different way. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child." One might say also "I did as a child." Jesus was giving expression to his religious nature in the temple. Mary, like many a mother to-day, sought him sorrowing. He was better lost. His parents had gone up to Jerusalem to work out the religious side of their nature- they saw the need of this for themselves. Having given expression to their feelings, they think only of returning. The child's needs are never for a moment considered nor understood. The trip is not made for him. He is permitted to go along as parents on the farm may take their children with them when they go to town, on business or for trade. Yes they overlooked the child- so completely did they do it that he was unintentionally left behind, in the city. Parents would have thought anyone insane if he had suggested a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with them only going along for fun or for the convenience of the trip. Yet am I not right in understanding that the words of Jesus had such an implication: "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" He seemed to say "I as well as you need to cultivate the

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religious side of my life." Here was the child teaching those who were older. Whether only childish wisdom, or the peculiar wisdom of Jesus, perfect even in His youth, in either case it was of God. A child cannot work out his religion simply by playing. To simply send him away to his toys is about as adequate as to rely on school playgrounds only for his education.

A popular story going the rounds to-day is that of a little fellow, called, a hypocrite, who got up in a testimony meeting and professed to have been converted forty years ago, but who is now only twelve or so. This is an example of expression given the wrong direction. It is not so serious as some seem anxious to make out. No great harm that one can discover has resulted. A few mistakes like this has made stern folks say that children should be seen and not heard. The worst of this is that they always take that to mean, "Seen sitting perfectly still on a chair, looking longingly to right and left but saying nothing!" The child should be seen - his needs and their proper expression.

We will all agree with Rishell that when children or younger people pray or speak publicly with the freedom of adults it is unnatural and shocking to educated sensibilities. Also that the boy evangelist may be both sincere and effective but that he is a monstrosity. In this case his feelings have outrun his years. Such a person is never a child. It is almost equally as bad as being always a child, never a man or a woman. Abnormal expression should be avoided, but not more so than abnormal repression.

The child's religion can express itself in reverence, confidence, acquiescence in the providence of God, gratitude, love to God and man. Coe writes: "Training in religion cannot be postponed to some particular period of life. ~~Not for a single year does the mind remain blank, with~~ reference to the interpretation of life. Very early the child witnesses specific religious phenomena. We cannot

hide from him our churches, our sacred books, and our worship. His religious training begins with the beginning of experience and goes forward with experience. The real question is not when it shall ~~it shall~~ begin but what kind it shall be." Childhood is essentially a period of muscular activity. It is essential that one secures the performance of religious deeds. In youth independent thinking and individual outlook upon life are important. This is not apart from but, in addition to the religious deeds of childhood (Horne)! Horne also suggests the following thoughts: Religious training is to consist of correct religious example. Deeds of religious service are to be suggested. Correct habits are to be formed. A just law together with gentle authority is best. The golden rule is to <sup>be</sup> followed. Veracity always must be insisted on. Tramps in field and wood are good. Mother is to be helped; the best ~~best~~ stories are to be read, especially those of the Old and New Testament. There is to <sup>be</sup> regularity in attendance upon religious services; out in the woods there is opportunity for reverent nature study. The truths thought about God are to be simple ones, such as His presence and help at all times. The child of twelve years old or younger is not to be over-stimulated. He may be guided safely. "The mother's knee, the mother's face, and the mother's love are the alphabet of every child's religious training. Every mother should rear her child as a possible savior in his own way of his people from their sins!"

Repression of the bad, while that helps is not enough. It is more difficult than at first appears. It frequently gives a negative light to morality. Righteousness and holiness come to be wrongly thought of as merely abstention from certain classes of acts. Good traits are to be studied. We are to rejoice in the good no less

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than we are to fear the evil. To develop the good is difficult, but there is a great deal of satisfaction in it. The appeal to self-respect is stronger than the appeal to shame. A child is naturally joyous and this is not to be overlooked by our inclination to seriousness. Repression is the more difficult because we cannot measure his conduct at any one period by the standards of a later one. We must tolerate and even approve, experts say, much that our forefathers felt constrained to condemn. The fights of little boys are an example of this. Students of pedagogy to-day look upon such fights as frequently an expression of a normal and a proper impulse. The recapitulation theory of racial history is that the child is first a savage, then a barbarian, and finally a civilized being. If this is true we must not be too intolerant of boy's gangs, their hunting, their interest in mimic war, and their desire for explorations. When these things show themselves parents need not be panic stricken. Positive training will show results. Being kind and initiating gradually into all that is best, is the thing that is necessary. Religious customs may soon be made to supplant the others. Their guide must be unselfish and consistent. Rewards and penalties should have some standard that does not vary too much. Obedience is to be regular, and the imagination directed to pleasurable objects only. Patience is to be exercised, only good things are to be permitted, and proper associates with other children provided. Life does not grow out of knowledge, but knowledge grows out of life.

Alcuin who died in 804, looked upon play as frivolous and something to be discouraged and suppressed. But we are coming more and more to see that "the play instinct is nature's way and so God's way of developing body, mind, and character" (Coe). God is to be in childhood's play as well as in manhood's labor and old folk's testimonies.

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Bushnell affirms that "play becomes a natural interpreter of what is highest and last in the great problem of our life itself." By play you can have strength where otherwise there would be weakness. There should be no break or even semblance of a break between the playground, the family altar, and the church. "Christ the master of the playground - the master not the spy or the oppressor; the promoter, not the opponent of play." (Coe). There is a story to the effect that John Fiske in childhood imagined God as an aged book-keeper leaning over his desk up in the sky and looking down to see how little children conduct themselves in order that he might record all their demerits. But are such notions worse than this one held by a prominent Sunday School leader as late as 1910: "It is wrong to talk about the kindergarten of the Bible school. Wise primary workers are averse to turning any part of the Bible school into a kindergarten because the thought of play should be kept for places other than God's house and for <sup>times</sup> other than the Lord's day." The unity of play and religion he has not grasped. His method will never secure control of the entire child for the Master. God is excluded from play, religion becomes unnatural, the child grows up indifferent to the Lord's calling. No one knows this better than Jane Addams and it would be hard to make a stronger appeal than she has in behalf of play: "The Greeks held their games so integral a part of religion and patriotism that they came to expect from their poets the highest utterances at the very moments when the sense of pleasure released the national life. In the medieval city the knights held their tourneys, the guilds their pageants, the people their dances, and the church made festival for its most cherished saints with gay street processions, and presented a drama in which no



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less a theme than the history of creation became a matter of thrilling interest. Only in the modern city have men concluded that it is no longer necessary for the municipality to provide for the insatiable desire for play. In so far as they have acted upon this ~~experiment~~ conclusion, they have entered upon a most difficult and dangerous experiment; Play must be organized and provided for as well as work "The love of pleasure will not be denied, and when it has turned into all sorts of malignant and vicious appetites, then we, the middle aged, grow quite distracted and resort to all sorts of restrictive measures. We even try to dam up the sweet fountain itself because we are affrighted by these neglected streams." (Addams).

When John Paul Jones, in his famous sea engagement, was asked ~~if~~ by the enemy if he was ready to declare himself defeated, he replied that he had not begun to fight yet. After a study of child religion, when one is asked if he is ready to strike his colors yet; if the fight <sup>for it</sup> is not hopeless, he too may say, "We have not begun to fight yet." There are possibilities of a tremendous victory, but if they are ever to be realized we must now put forth our supreme effort.