

ON THE TEACHING OF RELIGION TO CHILDREN.¹

BY WILLIAM DANKS.

THAT religion should have survived the unhappy methods in which it has been too frequently taught, is surely a testimony to the indestructibility of the religious instinct. That the tyranny, the repression, the perpetual prohibition, the conventionality, the dulness, and the gloom which have done duty for religious education in many a household, have not produced some wide and deep reaction against religion is surely wonderful. Perhaps, indeed, they have wrought such reaction, though we do not usually reckon it among the great anti-religious forces of our time. Perhaps more scoffing and scepticism are due to this cause than we fancy; perhaps more characters than we wot of have been hardened and degraded by revolt from the religious associations of childhood.

Compulsory Catechism, without any garment of life and colour thrown over its chill outlines; compulsory Bible-readings, without loving comment, or, worse still, Bible-passages set to be learnt as punishments, on the principle of turning the very Gospel itself into a kind of premonitory hell; Sundays of inexpressible weariness, and of perfectly unreasonable prohibitions, in which were blended the Sabbath not of Moses but of the Pharisees, English Puritanism, and a confusion of mind between respectability and religion—fatal Sundays, which rode in the procession of the days of the week as a hearse among wedding-coaches—that some of us should have endured these things and still find the springs of religion unbroken within us, is surely a notable thing. It is a witness that religion, like hope, “springs eternal in the human breast.”

And because this is so, because religion is an essential part of human nature, therefore it must be a part of any sensible scheme of education. There are persons who talk as though it were an “optional subject,” like Spanish or Italian, as though it might be taught or omitted according to taste or judgment like music and dancing. There are doctrinaires who think that the choice of a religion, like the choice of a profession, is best left till the child arrives at years of discretion, and who

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consequently leave the mighty religious instincts and emotions unguided and untrained during the years when guidance and training are most vital and most fruitful. There are sceptics who are so puzzled what religion to teach that they teach none, and are distressed to find in after years that their children have got the inevitable religious or irreligious bias from sources outside the home, and sometimes of an undesirable kind.

My doctrinaire friend, my sceptical friend, if you do not teach a child religion before it is ten years old, you will never teach it religion at all. The child may learn it later, from God, from sorrow, from failure or shame, from bitter experience that without God the human heart is a hell. But after those ten years of neglect you will never teach your child religion. You may teach it doctrines, theology, religious history; but if as little children we are not “by father dear or mother mild” taught the fear and love of the Father, taught the meaning of duty, self-denial, trust, and prayer, nothing can ever make up to us for that irreparable loss. Some of us bear in our souls to-day the scars and the darkness which have come of the lack of such teaching.

“Let them choose for themselves.” Do you leave them untaught in the difference between food and poison that they may have freedom of choice? Do you leave them ignorant

of reading and writing that they may choose what language to read or write in? Is the bread of wheat so much more solid a benefit than the Bread of Life? the knowledge of the alphabet than the knowledge of God? the rule of three than the golden rule? To parents who educate without religion it is surely written *“A foolish son is a grief to his father and a bitterness to her that bare him. * * * It were better that a millstone were hanged about a man’s neck, and he cast into the midst of the sea, than that he should offend (cause to stumble) one of these little ones.”*

The first principle to lay down with regard to the religious education of the young is surely this, that it does not consist in learning anything out of a book. Bible and Catechism may be committed to memory and repeated by rote without so much as being related to the things of the spirit. Words, even Bible words, are not in themselves food for the soul, but only the vehicles in which that food may or may not be conveyed.

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There is but one hand which can fill those empty vessels with spiritual nourishment, and that is the hand of love. No child can be taught religion except by a person who loves religion and who also loves the child. In short, the right religious teacher of children is the father or the mother; and the mother first. No school, however good, can, in this matter, supersede the teaching function of home. No attempt to foist the responsibility upon Day or Sunday Schools can end otherwise than in calamity. As allies and auxiliaries they are admirable; alone they are a failure.

Religion taught in class will very rarely steal to the heart and filter to the soul like religion taught at the fireside by wise mother or father. School religion lacks personal application, personal influence, personal charm, even when well taught: when taught as routine it ceases to be religion at all. The fury with which rival denominations have contended about the shell or husk of religious education presents a curious contrast with the apathy concerning its kernel or essence at home.

Do I then regard Scripture History Lessons as of no value? Their value is great, but, unless taught in a special way by a religious and loving spirit, that value is entirely as history or literature, and not as religion. History is history in the Bible or out of it, and belongs to the domain of the intellect; religion is religion in the Bible or out of it, and belongs to the different domain of emotion and of spirit.

Let us turn from the negative to the positive side of the subject, and ask: Where then is real religious education to be found, and what are its methods?

The first and chief fountain from which a child drinks in religion is Personal Influence, whether exercised through verbal teaching, through the force of example, or through verbal magnetism of spiritual contact. We scarcely need to be reminded that a child’s powers of sustained attention and reflection are small, while its powers of imitation and of affection are great, and very early developed. Home is the temple of religious training for all, whether they spend half the year at boarding school or not. The home in which parents control their impulses, keep sweet their tempers, rule their life and conversation by noble motives and high principles, and in all controversies with the children, while exacting instant and

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inexorable obedience, yet base that demand more and more, as the children grow older, on their sense of justice and reasonableness; the home which sees all this, will also see the growth of solid, right, and noble character in the children, although catechism be never taught by rote and Scripture history be imperfectly remembered. In the home where parents have a solemn

sense of the reality of the unseen world, and an awful reverence for things truly sacred and really divine, there will the spirit of reverence spring up in the children without a word of drill about attitudes in church. So shall they inherit the bequest of which Plato speaks in the "Laws"—"*Let parents bequeath to their children not riches, but the spirit of reverence.*" So shall they inherit the blessing spoken of by one upon whom some of Plato's insight has fallen—"*This is the thing which I know, that in reverence is the chief joy and power of life*" (Ruskin). And so, finally, shall they come in later years to understand Shakespeare's declaration that
"Reverence is the angel of the world."

A few words perhaps would not be amiss here on church-going and behaviour in church. What is the cure for inattention, carelessness, or ill-conduct during public worship? Certainly not the imposition of tasks or the repetition of scoldings. The Church should never be associated with the idea of compulsion. It should always be the Father's earthly House. It is a mistake even with grown-up people to insist much upon the duty as distinguished from the privilege of public worship. It is a mistake to speak of it as God's requirement rather than as man's opportunity and necessity. The cure for ill-behaviour in church is the refusal of permission to go to church on the following Sunday, or if need be on the following three or four Sundays. This may seem a slight punishment. But a child will soon feel the sting of exclusion from what its elders prize, and the disgrace of being unfit to join the weekly worship; severer punishment is not needed. This, wisely and lovingly applied, is sufficient and effective. Parents who themselves neglect worship cannot hope to teach it to their young people.

Some one has said, I think Ruskin, that a man's real worth and moral value are in exact proportion to the amount of his mother's patience with him in childhood. It is an over-statement, for inherited qualities and dispositions probably
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count for more than even the best and most perfect training of any single generation. But it is the over-statement of a great truth, the truth that of all the external influences on a child's life the two mightiest are the power of patience and the power of the parent. Mothers of intractable children are reduced to despair by the constant recurrence of the tempers and faults. What they do not realize is that their work on the child's spirit is as slow and imperceptible as the building of a coral reef; but when once accomplished it becomes part of the everlasting rock. It is the business of parents to be patient, and strong, and loving, till they have become to those wayward little hearts ideals, incarnations of the divine.

When parents have thus won the worship of their children—surely an easy thing to do, with right parents and right children—when personal influence and example have laid the foundation broad and deep, then will come with real, unspeakable, life-long result, the power of direct verbal teaching, book in hand if you wish, to build the superstructure. The power of such teaching will always be strictly limited by the character of the teacher. Hypocrites cannot teach religion to children, though they sometimes can to grown-up persons. The shallow, conventional, unconsciously insincere person, if he is fluent and something of an actor, can influence men and women, can impose upon them for their good at times: but he is impotent before the clear gaze of childhood. It is useless for parents whose whole life is one long push for money and position to try to teach young people, Bible in hand, the laws of self-sacrifice and spiritual life. The thing is not to be done. It is the most obvious cant (and children hate cant) for such people to read aloud that "he only is advancing in life whose heart is getting softer, whose

blood warmer, whose brain quicker, whose spirit is entering into living peace.” It is useless for parents who are worldly or self-indulgent to tell their children that it is more blessed to give than to receive, or that the pure in heart shall see God.

And now that we have got safely into the region of direct verbal instruction in religion let us mark four things:

1. Theology for children must be very simple. A Heavenly Father, who made the stars and the flowers, who will listen to their childish thoughts because He is their Father, and who will, if they ask Him, whisper good thoughts into their hearts, and

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help them to bear their disappointments; a Son, in whom that Father showed Himself on earth that men might realize His love and goodness, His sympathy with human sorrow and pain, and the hatefulness of sin; a Holy Spirit, which to every child witnesses of right and wrong, in the happiness of fulfilled duty, and in the misery of a violated conscience; all this you may teach and amplify. But beware of confusing with controversial issues, and of teaching what some day may have to be unlearned with difficulty and regret.

2. Of all errors, one of the most fatal is the multiplication of injunctions and prohibitions, the placing of observances, proprieties, conventionalities on a level with the great obligations, the *teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*. A familiar example of this may be found in the attaching of as much blame to fidgeting in church, to forgetfulness of Sunday, or the like, as to a lie, or to a selfish or base act. Keep your blame in reserve, that you may have a good store of it when you would stem the tide of impurity or dishonour. Do not waste that over trifles which you may want for emergencies. The seldomer you show displeasure with a child the greater will be the effect of displeasure when it is shown. Be easy over the *commandments of men*, that you may proclaim with force the law of God.

3. It is absolutely essential that we should be true in our teaching, frank, fearless, and perfectly honest. Answer childish questions plainly, or plainly confess that you cannot, or tell them that they must wait for the answer till they are older. *But do not make them wait too long*. If you do, they will obtain the answer elsewhere, and possibly a false answer, or one partly false, or one framed in an ignoble spirit. I have no sympathy whatever with the Protestant Jesuitism of teaching children not what is true, but what you think good for them. You may limit or deny information, giving reason for your limitation or denial. But what you say, though it may not be the whole truth, must be nothing but the truth. And do not keep the whole truth back too long. Dishonesty is as catching as small-pox, and honesty lies at the root of all spiritual life. “Honesty is not based on religion, but religion on honesty. Your honesty must be based as the sun is, in vacant heaven; poised as the lights in the firmament which have rule over the day and over the night. If you ask why you are to be honest,

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you are in the question itself dishonoured. ‘Because you are a man’ is the only answer. And therefore ... to make your children capable of honesty is the beginning of education. Make them men first, and religious men afterwards, and all will be sound; but a knave’s religion is always the rottenest thing about him.”

You say, “How can we teach honestly, as it stands, the earlier part of the Old Testament? And yet how can we explain to a child what modern criticism has explained to us?”

You can do both if you will take a little pains. Read Abbott's *Bible Lessons*. Learn what to think yourself, and then impart your thought.

At first you must tell the Old Testament stories just as they stand. But as intelligence grows, and the moral sense deepens, both must be led to play freely round the subject. It is not short of a crime, in these days, to tell a child that the world was created B.C. 4004, and to leave it to stumble unprepared in later years on Lyell and Darwin. It enhances rather than diminishes the charm of the story to point out the weak points of Jacob and the strong points of Esau. What more delightful book for parents than Stanley's *Lectures on the Jewish Church*? And what more excellent preparation for their teaching of Scripture History?

You say again, "How can we teach honestly about the relationship of the sexes, and answer the questions of children about their own origin?"

Tell your little ones what is meant by their bodies being temples of the Holy Ghost. Speak of the sacredness of love, of the wondrous nearness of that relationship between mother and child which is begun in the absolute union of their two lives in one body. As years pass on, teach the sacrilege of loveless marriage, the miserable profanity of light words or impure thoughts on the most wondrous mystery of our earthly life.

4. Do not forget the immense religious value of good biography. Christianity is never so easy to understand, so mighty to uplift and fortify the heart, as when it is seen in the life of a great-hearted, high-souled Christian. In and out of the Church's Calendar, in political, ecclesiastical, social history, there are lives which shed more light on the gospel than all the [p 665]

class books that ever were written. The lives of such men as Francis of Assisi, Bernard of Clairvaux, Savonarola, Fra Angelico, Sir Thomas More, William Tyndale, Bishop Latimer, Martin Luther, John Wesley, William Wilberforce, John Howard, General Gordon, and a hundred others are full of inspiration. Biography is an inexhaustible gold mine for the religious teacher. There is such a thing as so-called definite religious teaching, which is entirely without moral root, or relation to experience. In biography there is definite heroic teaching, which is also religious in the truest sense, and which has its roots deep in morality, fact, and the soul of man. Are not all saintly and noble characters reflections of the Light of the World? The child who is taught to see Christ in every brave, holy, and devoted life will not fail to find out that all true life is Life in Christ.

Yes, tell them that sweetest and noblest biography of all. Tell them—forgive these simple words—how Jesus loved and obeyed His mother, and how in the fulness of His prime He took little children in His arms and blessed them. Tell them of His gentleness, kindness, and great courage, how, when He was mocked and buffeted, He never spake an angry word, and yet how He never feared the face of man nor the shadow of death, but let loose the lightnings of His wrath upon those who betrayed the ignorant and poor. Tell them of His dying pity for the rough Roman soldiers who nailed Him to the Cross.

Tell them the old, old story
Of things unseen above.
Of Jesus and his glory,
Of Jesus and his love.

Tell them of these things plainly, earnestly, lovingly, in the simple words which the Holy Spirit and your own motherly hearts put into your mouths, and you will see the little hearers hanging on your lips, listening with a child's interest, a child's awe, a child's religion. You will find the story one they love to hear, and have much to ask about. You mothers, teach them in this way: you fathers, count their presence sacred, and let your sins or indifference never dispel their childish reverence and faith. So will home become to them a sacred word, and God an inspiring thought; and, when they grow up, they will not, as too often they do, break roughly and rudely away from the ties

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of early association, and fling off your authority as a hostile thing.

Above all, teach them to pray. Not to ask foolish and selfish petitions, and to expect boons which you know will not be granted, but to pour out their little hearts before their unseen Father, and ask Him for courage and patience, and guidance to do right. Teach them the child's use of the Lord's Prayer, and how He who taught us so to pray never asked anything for Himself without adding, *Not My will, but Thine be done*. Teach them how He, like us, learned to pray at His mother's knee, and afterwards learned the fulness of obedience by the things He suffered.

Was not our Lord a little child,
Taught by degrees to pray?
By father dear and mother mild,
Instructed day by day?

How many have had dark and cruel thoughts of God put into their hearts, till they have come to regard Him as a task-master to be feared, and if possible, forgotten? How many have been brought to regard the work of Christ Himself as but one more testimony to the terribleness of a God whom blood alone could appease? Ah! teach not your children these dreary lies, but the sweet truth of His boundless compassion and enduring love. Teach them how He has comforted you in your own sorrows and helped you in your own temptations. Teach them how that we are all little children in His sight, big and little, old and young, wise and foolish; and how, when your time is come, you trust to lie down under the shelter of His wings, and be carried by angels unto the Home where He gathers all His children of every age and land. Teach them that the true revelation of God is the Man round whom gathered the merry brown children of old, and who folded them in His arms because He loved them. So shall their love of you be transmuted into the love of Christ, and the love of Christ shall be in them the love of God.

¹ See *Our Work*.