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Francis Greenwood Peabody D. D. ^a

^a Professor in Harvard University , Cambridge, Mass.

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"THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AND THE RELIGIOUS LIFE." *

FRANCIS GREENWOOD PEABODY, D. D.
Professor in Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

It may not unreasonably have been felt by some friends of this Association that the general theme announced for the deliberations of this Congress carries us quite beyond the original purpose of our organization, and into a region of discussion which, however interesting and timely it may be, is quite distinct from the problem which concerns us here. Religious education, it may be said, deals with the child, the individual, the Church; social duty deals with the community, the industrial order, the State. Religious education leads to a better knowledge of God; social duty leads to a better service of man.

The two enterprises stand near together, but they face, as it were, opposite ways. Religious education looks toward the Eternal; social duty looks toward the contemporary. Is it not, then, a questionable use of our opportunity, not to say a perversion of our trust, if even for a single session an organization pledged to religious education should be invited to consider the perplexing problems of social duty, which so gravely divide and distract the thought of the modern world? The hesitation which may be thus expressed concerning our immediate purpose reflects a much more general scepticism which many religious people frankly confess. The absorbing interest of the present age in social duty, its desire for social service and its dream of social revolution,—have been, it is admitted, a summons to the Christian Church as to the modern world, to new forms of duty; but have they not, it is asked, diverted the Church from its original and permanent purpose of redeeming and sanctifying the individual soul? Is not the Church tempted to diminish its devotion to worship, and to apply its energies to work? Are we not substituting clubs, gymnasiums and social settlements for prayers, conversions and revivals? Is not the Church in our day less frequented than the parish house, and the preacher drawn to a gospel of social reform rather than to a gospel of salvation? And where, if anywhere, shall we escape from this peril of secularized and truncated Christianity if not in an assembly expressly devoted to religious education? Shall not the clamorous demands of social duty be, for the moment, hushed while the soul of man listens for the instruction of God?

Much there is, no doubt, in the temper of the present time which justifies in devout people this sense of apprehension. The awakening of the social conscience has been so abrupt and start-

* The President's Annual Address at the Sixth General Convention of the Religious Education Association.

ling, and the reaction from an individualized and self-centered religion so marked and compelling, that the Church as a religious shrine may be easily supplanted by the Church as a social laboratory; and the practice of the presence of God may be forgotten in the practice of the service of man. The tremendous force of the social renaissance sweeps Christian teachers into restatements of Christian doctrine, which identify a social programme with the essentials of a Christian faith.

"I regard socialism," one such preacher has lately announced at the beginning of his book, "as the practical expression of Christian ethics and the Evangel of Jesus." * * * "Socialism is actually a swing back to that Gospel of the Kingdom of God which was the only Gospel the first Christians had to preach; indeed, we may say that [it] may without the least exaggeration be described as the inheritor of the true Christianity." Such an effect of the social conscience may well appear to indicate the disintegration and superfluity of the religious life. Where, it may be asked, is the place for personal piety among these pressing demands of social service? Are the economists, sociologists, philanthropists, or revolutionists to represent all that is left of Christian faith? Is the Christian Church to teach an industrial revolution instead of a spiritual evolution? Are we to be so busy in doing good that we have no time to be good? Is the old issue between faith and works to be revived, and must another Paul preach again the vanity of unspiritualized conduct and the power of the risen life? The situation is certainly not without gravity, when many circumstances of the time conspire to transform the Christian Church into a charity-bureau, or a lecture-platform, or a recreation-ground, or a medical clinic. The Association which invites us here, however, is a form of protest against this substitution of the temporary for the Eternal. It would be nothing less than recreancy to a sacred trust if this Congress were to substitute social ethics for religious education, and to turn our attention from the problems of the religious life to the problems of philanthropy, industrial reform, or social revolution.

There are, however, two considerations which amply justify the theme to which this session of our Association is pledged, and which may be briefly considered as we enter upon our elaborate and inviting programme. In the first place, we have reached in the logical order of subjects, the problems which confront religious education as it meets the forces of modern social life. In four successive conventions we have considered, first, the improvement of methods in religious training; second, the basis of such training in the Bible; third, the aims which this education represents; and, fourth, the materials which it must use.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Having thus laid a foundation for religious pedagogy we proceeded last year,—and most appropriately at the Capital of the Nation,—to consider the relation which this discipline of the religious life may hold to the duties of citizenship, and the contribution of religion to the development of national life. At this point, however, it is impossible to stop. Beyond the primary question of citizenship lies the vast complexity of social conditions and obligations, of which citizenship is the most elementary expression. If in religious education we have at our command a spiritual force, which has definite methods, authority and aims, it must be applicable,—and it is high time that we prove its applicability,—to the perplexing and tragic problems which are at this moment testing the foundations of American life. Religion, like all other interests of civilization, must submit itself to the test of social utility. Are the vast expenditures of money and self-sacrifice which are expended in churches and Sunday schools, on the preaching and teaching of religion, justified by their social product? Does religious education fortify social duty? Is the Christian Church to be reckoned with as a factor in the social problem; or is it—as many agitators frankly assert—the shell of a discarded faith, a club of the prosperous, a bulwark of the capitalist, a social menace rather than a social force? Questions like these are not so much selected as inevitable. However resolutely one may withdraw himself into some quiet corner of the world, where piety and prayer may be undisturbed, the noisy problems of the time intrude themselves on his devotions and refuse to be silenced. “By their fruits ye shall know them,” they repeat in words which the disciple of Jesus can hardly decline to hear. Each institution of society,—the family, the organization of business, the State,—must meet this test of social serviceableness. How is it, then, with the organization of religion? What are the social fruits of religious education, and what, on the other hand, is the religious education which is known by its fruits? Here is a subject which is not so much to be defended as legitimate as it is to be accepted as essential. If religious education is good, it must be good for something; and if a soul is rightly trained to know God, that fact must be recognizable in a better service of God’s children. The primary defense of religious education in the modern world is the evidence that such education is the prolific source of social leadership, wisdom, efficiency and peace.

This aspect of religious education is, however, merely preliminary to the second consideration which dictates to this Convention its present theme. The social movement which is so overwhelming in its appeal, the growth of social responsibility in charity, in legislation, and in industry, often expresses itself in

forms which may seem remote from religious education, and which may even ignore and deny religious motives and ideals; but it does not follow, even from this appearance of indifference or hostility, that these expressions of the social conscience have no part in religious education, and are not to be reckoned with in the interpretation of the religious life. There are many paths along which the Teacher of the Ages guides the education of the human race. At one time He speaks to the intellect, and the theologians answer Him with their definitions of truth. At such a time religious education becomes the acceptance of a creed. At another time God calls men through their imaginations, and the religious education of His pupils is expressed in mediaeval cathedrals, in sacred art, in the ritual, the hymns, and the adoration of the Church. Each soul is in its turn an epitome of this history of the race, and the religious education of the reason and of the imagination have their part in guiding personal experience through the multiplying mysteries of life. Is it not possible, however, that in addition to these familiar forms of spiritual instruction a way of religious education may also open through the dedication of the will, and a path to the knowledge of God be found along the road of the service of man? May not the absorbing concern of the present time for social redemption, even though it does not lead to the inner sanctuaries of religious conviction, at least open a vista where the spires and towers of the City of God may be distinctly seen? May not, in short, the call of the social conscience be a new call from God; a *Preparatio Evangelica* which is the sign of a spiritual renaissance and hope?

One of the most striking characteristics of the teaching of Jesus is the sequence of experiences which led men by successive steps to him. Jesus did not, first of all, demand of his disciples a complete understanding of his character and purpose, or an emotional exaltation of ecstasy or praise. His first appeal was neither to the reason nor to the imagination; but to the will. He asked, first, a practical loyalty, a dedication to service, a pledge of obedience. Follow me, he said, Take up thy cross and follow; and along the way of self-forgetting service there shall be disclosed to you that religious assurance which the Scribes and Pharisees seek in vain. He that willeth to do the will, shall know of the doctrine.

What ye do unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye do unto Me. Jesus, in short, accepts as His followers men of half-formed opinions and unstable faith, and trusting them with His work, looks to see His ideals formed within them, and His faith in them at last justified by their faith in Him. It was the pedagogical instinct of the born teacher, who knows that faith in the capacity of the pupil is the first condition of creating that capacity.

Believing in His followers before they believed in themselves, He made them, just as they were, the instruments of a work which they would not have believed themselves fit to do.

If that is the natural order of events in the evolution of a Christian discipleship, it has profound significance for religious education under the conditions of the modern world.

Here is this multitude of people, stirred as never before in history by the impulses of social duty; here is this prodigal philanthropy, accepting on an unprecedented scale its social responsibility and conforming to the Apostle's teaching that we are members one of another; here is this industrial agitation, often so crude and misdirected, yet even in its harshest forms essentially the demand for a more human, fraternal, organic, co-operative world; and here, finally, is our political idealism, often so thwarted by self-interest and ambition and greed, yet emerging with each year into a clearer demand for integrity, justice, magnanimity and peace. How shall all these characteristic marks of the present time be estimated and interpreted in their total meaning and implication? They may be considered by others as economic phenomena, or as legislative expedients, or as political reforms; but to the religious mind this world-wide dedication of the will to social service represents nothing less than a new manifestation—on the most vast and imposing scale—of the method of religious education which was hallowed by the ministry of Jesus Christ, and which follows the path of social duty as one way toward the religious life. Here is the point at which a Religious Education Convention meets the perplexing and undetermined problems of modern social life. If the institution of the Family, for example, were a temporary contract of convenience between what the law calls "the two parties concerned," then it would be a subject more appropriate for legislatures and divorce courts than for this meeting; but if the institution of the Family is the unit of civilization, the first expression of the socialized will, the world's first experiment in altruism, the first step in God's education of the human race, then the defense of its integrity and stability becomes a primary responsibility of those who represent the science of religious education. Or if, again, the industrial agitation of the present age were a mere scramble for the gains of production and a merciless conflict between employers and employed, then it would concern us here as little as the conflict of wolves for their spoil, or the scramble of swine for their trough; but if the total picture of the industrial world, with all its blemishes and blots, represents a scene of fundamental integrity, a form of moral discipline, the slow but certain Nemesis of dishonor, and the delayed but assured reward of righteousness,

then this also becomes material for the student of religious education, and unfolds before his eyes the drama of God's training of the modern world, and the evidence that the fear of Him is the beginning of wisdom. Or if, finally, the world of politics were—as it is often supposed to be—a subterranean labyrinth of intrigue, self-seeking and subterfuge, there would be little need for us to desert the clear atmosphere of religious education and explore those stifling passages of pettiness and fraud; but if it becomes evident that the epochs of modern statesmanship must be made by clean and candid sagacity, that the best guarantee of popular acceptance is an incorruptible fidelity and an unselfish aim, if an Ambassador from a foreign nation must commend himself, not by subtle shrewdness, but by intellectual discernment and moral straightforwardness; if a Chief Magistrate—whatever else he may have achieved to fix his place in history—will be permanently remembered as having spoken to the conscience of the nation and having been an instrument of industrial and international peace, then a Religious Education Convention would sadly mistake the scope of its own proper task if it did not recognize this unprecedented ethical awakening in our political affairs as the most conspicuous mark of an Eternal purpose working through the institutions of the time.

To what a high place, to what a broad horizon are we thus led! There are many details of religious education which concern us as teachers, preachers, and students of music or art; but from these technical relations of our theme we are summoned throughout the Sessions before us to see the whole of modern life as a scene of God's dealing with men, and to watch among the shifting aspects of social life the signs of the Divine method. What is the chief defect of this vast enterprise of social duty? It is not that it is wrongly directed, but that it does not perceive the end to which it moves. It is not that it is irreligious, but that its religious meaning has not been recognized and appropriated. It has believed itself an economic, a philanthropic, or a legislative movement, when it is in fact the contemporary expression of the spirit of God touching the hearts of men. It is not the whole of religion; still less is it a substitute for religion; but it is that first dedication of the will to service, which now, as in the days of Jesus Christ, opens the way to faith. And what is the immediate task of religious education, but to bring the social conscience into conscious relation with the Eternal, to trace the course of social duty to its outlet in the ocean of God, and to discover in the brotherhood of man,—which is the modern social gospel,—and the Fatherhood of God,—which is the permanent gospel of religion,—not two commandments, but, as the Master taught, opposite sides of One Law.