Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/urea20>

RELIGION AND MORAL EDUCATION

James Bryce ^a

^a Ambassador from Great Britain to the United States

Published online: 10 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: James Bryce (1909) RELIGION AND MORAL EDUCATION, Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association, 4:1, 30-33, DOI: [10.1080/0034408090040104](https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408090040104)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0034408090040104>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

RELIGION AND MORAL EDUCATION.

JAMES BRYCE.

Ambassador from Great Britain to the United States.

In every country which has recognized the provision of education to be a duty of the state the question of whether any, and if so, what instruction in religion should be given, has arisen to divide citizens and perplex statesmen. In England, where the general sentiment of the people desires some such instruction, we have for nearly sixty years been disputing how far the various religious bodies should be intrusted with it, how far the State may sanction the teaching of those fundamentals of Christianity which the great majority of the population accept in common. The position here is different. Holding that the State should be absolutely neutral in all religious matters, you have thought it best to restrict the public schools of all grades to purely secular subjects. But in thus escaping the clash of denominational pretensions, you are left facing the difficulty of how the children of the nation are to receive any instruction at all in religious matters, which many of us, and certainly you of this Association, deem to be of the highest significance for the nation's life and welfare.

Upon the various practical aspects of that difficulty it is not for me to speak. You, who are American citizens, know far better what are the means suited to attain the end which you desire. All I can speak of tonight is the importance of the end itself, the grounds which make it not only desirable but necessary to find some way of impressing upon the minds of the young the truths or at least the broadest and most fundamental truths of religion.

Most of us here present think this can best be done by a teaching distinctively Christian. But while thinking so myself, I prefer for the moment to consider the matter from a point of view which would include those who belong to other faiths in which they find that moral standard and from which they draw that spiritual force which Christianity gives to you and me.

Events have happened and influences are at work in our time which make the need for religious instruction in schools a specially urgent need. Let me note some of these phenomena.

One is the weakening among those who are called orthodox Christians—and the same holds true of orthodox Jews—of certain traditions and dogmas which were formerly deemed certain, and, in particular the prevalence of a view of the Scriptures which attributes to them less of a Divine Authority than the theology of a century ago recognized. Another is what may be called a general unsettlement of opinion on religious questions in all classes. It is supposed by many that the progress of scientific discovery has shaken some of the foundations of religion, that

historical criticism has undermined others, that man and his planet are of far less significance in the universe than they were once held to be. Thus a more material and less spiritual view of the ends and scope of human life has gained ground.

Those who have thought seriously on these subjects, as all of you here present have doubtless done, will hold that the changes I have referred to do not affect the essentials of religion nor modify the view we take of man's nature and destiny, nor of his relations to the Supreme Power. All I wish to convey is that the great mass of persons who do not think seriously and who have hitherto taken the doctrines of religion, either Natural Religion or Revealed Religion, on trust, as a matter of habit, because they have been so taught as children, or because they have seen other people so take them, have been influenced by this change and that many of them are coming to attach less weight to the teachings and the sanctions of religion than did their parents or grandparents. This tendency has been largely stemmed by the increased activity and devotion of the churches, and of such organizations as the Young Men's Christian Association and the Christian Endeavor Societies. Nevertheless it exists.

Coincidentally with it there has been an immense development of the passion for pleasure and of the opportunities for obtaining it. Life is for all classes, except the very poorest, far more filled with amusements than it used to be, and the sense that everybody has a right to amusements has gone so far with many as to make amusement appear to be the chief end of man. Without at all implying that there is any moral decline visible, still less that there is anything wrong in the desire for enjoyment, one may observe that the notions of duty and self control seem less present to the minds of most people than they once were, and that the claim of the individual to indulge his will, or it may be his caprice, in some matters of serious import to society such as, for instance, the marriage relation, has become more avowed and more aggressive.

Life has always been a very material affair to many. There were always those who said, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." I will not assert that there are more persons who say so now, or who act upon the principle. But they seem nowadays less abashed.

In certain classes of the community, and especially among those who are of native American stock, the old New England traditions of moral earnestness and religious practice continue to be powerful, and a form of Puritanism, much broadened and softened, has not wholly vanished. But the ratio these classes bear to the whole population has been greatly reduced. The children of the immigrants who have poured like a flood into

the United States during the last sixty years are strangers to these time honored traditions. The moral sanctions which in Europe governed the life of the new comers, whatever those sanctions were, have well nigh vanished, except, of course, so far as they continue to belong to some Christian church or to a Jewish synagogue; and with many the influence of church or synagogue scarcely affects moral conduct. This vast mass of people injected into a country with whose previous moral and religious life they have practically no connection is a new and a formidable phenomenon.

In the state of facts I have tried to sketch there are two agencies which have most to do with forming the characters of the young and creating ethical standards for them. These are the schools and the newspapers. Of the newspapers regarded as a moral influence you can judge so much better than a stranger could that I need say nothing. In the day schools religious instruction is not given at all. Moral instruction is given to an extent which varies from state to state, but I gather that it is nowhere an important part of the school course and in many places amounts to very little. Your efforts to increase it in quality as well as in quantity have already done good. Like efforts are being made in England. But far more is wanted in both countries.

The value of and indeed the necessity for ethical instruction is so generally admitted that there is no occasion for dwelling on it, so I will pass on to a topic which presents more difficulty. I mean the relation of religion to ethical instruction. There are those who think the latter can be given quite apart from any theology, even from natural theology. This view I shall not attempt to discuss. It is enough to observe that hitherto the moral standard has been fixed by religion, moral precepts have been delivered on religious authority, and religious motives have been or have been believed to be, the ground of moral action to the great majority of civilized mankind. In England and America, religion has been the force behind the moral law and has prescribed moral action. What would happen were that force withdrawn?

The vast majority of people in your country and in mine have not the knowledge or the time or the capacity to think these matters out for themselves and to arrive at independent conclusions in religion. They have accepted the great fundamental doctrines as true because others believed them, because they learned them from their parents or at school, or heard them in church, and perceived that they were generally accepted. Their belief was hardly less helpful to them because it was grounded not upon independent investigation but upon associations from childhood and from the appeal which the doctrines had made

to their emotions when those emotions were still in a fresh and receptive state. The habitual use of the Bible and familiarity with its words and with the persons and scenes it describes contributed greatly to this emotional impression.

Those of you who are accustomed to reflect on these subjects and also are persuaded of the truth of the doctrines referred to will not be influenced by any of the phenomena which have been mentioned as tending to unsettle man's views and to push religion into the background of thought and life. But what of that great majority to which the knowledge and capacity for independent thought are wanting, and who are swept along by the tide of common opinion and usage?

To you, who belong to this Association a belief in the existence and power and goodness of a Supreme Being, Creator and Ruler of the Universe seems to constitute the very foundation of life and conduct. To you the sense of the responsibility of Man to God and his duty to his fellow men, both those now living and those who are to come after, seems essential to the maintenance of the moral standard and to the formation of moral character. Without denying that there has been and may be high excellence without these beliefs, we feel that a world in which they had ceased to rule the minds of men would be a world left without the influences which have hitherto prompted the best acts and restrained the worst impulses. In such a world the conception of man, his nature, his dignity, his worth in the general scheme of things, would be different from what it has been. What, under such changed conditions might be the sense of duty to one's higher self or to one's neighbor, I will not venture to predict; but surely not the same if the idea of an Unseen Power had been withdrawn, or if that Power had itself ceased to stand in any moral relation to its creatures—had ceased to embody for them their highest conceptions of Holiness, Righteousness, Mercy and Truth.

If you think that the strength and happiness of a people lie in the elevation of its moral standard and in the extent to which its conduct strives to attain its ideals, if you believe that religion gives life and warmth and force to morality, you will feel how strong is the call upon you to see that the truths of which I have spoken are brought home to the young and that moral precepts are placed before them in that religious form which gives them the highest sanctity. In particular you will be anxious to see that such writings as the New Testament and the Psalms become familiar to them, as they were familiar to our parents and to many of us in our boyhood. Can we conceive a greater loss to a people than that these should pass out of the thought of a people, or should cease to be one of the mainsprings of its life?