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The Child's Self-expression and Religious Education

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According to biology, life may be described as a series of interactions between the individual and its environment. The environment supplies the stimuli called air, light, heat, food, other living creatures, and, among men, social manners, customs, institutions, knowledge, etc. The individual responds to these stimuli, appropriates or rejects them, uses or misuses them. The result is, life, complete or incomplete, progressive or retrogressive, as the case may be. It is this individual response to environment, this reaction of living creatures to stimuli in ways that determine their character, that I mean to describe by the term "self-expression."

Self-expression thus understood, is the vitalizing principle of life and mind. The material world is not food, shelter, clothing, protection, for animal or man, until it is appropriated through the particular forms of self-expression suitable to its uses. A hungry animal or man must seek food, and every cell of the organism must actively assimilate it, before the body can be nourished and the hunger satisfied. The spiritual world is not actualized as love, faith, hope, truth, until the soul of man has expressed itself somehow in terms of these great realities. Life, in brief, as we are told in Holy Writ, does not consist of the things a creature possesses. It consists rather of the quantity and quality of selfhood that are called forth by these possessions. Life is a thing dynamic, active, responsive, self-determining and hence creative. Biologically speaking, it is not our surroundings but what we do with them, that is the important thing, fundamentally. Two individuals may eat the same kind of food, but they will assimilate it differently, and the results, estimated in organic energy, will not be the same. They may read the same book, but what they get out of it will depend upon the kind of reaction they individually make to it.

Neurology adds emphasis to this biological conception of self-expression. The brain has been developed largely through the motor responses to sensation; that is, through the self-expression

of the neurones that have to do with physical action. There is not only a sensory mechanism to receive the in-coming stimuli, but also a motor mechanism, to provide for the outgoing discharge of energy. Stimulus, response, sensation, movement—this sums up the primary functions of the brain. The relatively large motor areas of the latter prove how great has been the influence of expression in developing the organ of the mind, and how important must be this expression, daily and hourly, in determining its blood-supply and the resultant nourishment and elimination of waste. The conclusion is irresistible that the nervous system is fashioned, racially and individually, according to the types and degrees of self-expression. Man is unique among living creatures not only because he was made so at the beginning, but because he has become so thorough doing the things peculiar to his manhood. In a very vital and practical sense, he has created himself. So, too, the individual is not only *born* a man; he *becomes* a man by fashioning for himself a brain that can feel the feelings and think the thoughts that are human. This he does, in a large measure, according as he lives or is allowed to live, on the level of most complete self-expression.

Fröbel was the first to make extensive application of the principle of self-expression to the instruction of children. He regarded self-activity as the creative factor in the child's life. Through it, the child shares the divine nature itself, and becomes a co-operator with God in creating an ever new world. Fröbel emphasized self-activity under two aspects: First, education should see to it that the child does things for himself—appropriates the world of knowledge through his own eyes, ears and hands; creates the world of his own soul through activities self-initiated—parents and teachers merely providing a favorable environment and supplying the proper stimulus. Second, education should see to it that the child's *whole* self is active,—not a part of his being merely, as the intellect, or some particular faculty, but the entire being, as expressed in feeling, intellect and will. Thus, according to Fröbel, education should help the child to express his whole self, realize in objective achievements the best powers of his nature, and so co-operate with God in the creation of his own soul, through activities suited to a self-conscious and self-determining being.

If this discussion has thus far seemed nebulous and impractical to the reader, I hope its meaning will become clear as we apply it to the problems of religious education. Does the religious environment that we create for our children in the church and Sunday-school meet the conditions that insure life? That is, does it stimulate reactions in the child that involve his entire self? Is it natural to him—an environment in which he feels at home, in which he enjoys himself, in which he delights to work and live? Does it provide for him complete opportunities for self-expression? Does it stimulate feelings that are true to his age and outlook upon life? Does it set going trains of thought that he will follow up of his own accord? Does it provide for activities that he can put his best energies into with enthusiasm and look back upon for days and months as having given him something tangible and vital? If these questions can be answered in the affirmative, then are we really educating our children in the churches and Sunday-schools. If they cannot be so answered, then are we not educating our children in these places. And more: We are violating the laws of life and growth—arresting the process not only of religious development, but of moral and intellectual as well.

But, perhaps, such a religious environment cannot be created? Perhaps, it is not possible, if indeed necessary, that religious educators should stimulate feelings that are natural to the child, or excite thought that can be interpreted through experience, or secure activities that give play to healthy instincts and ambitions? Well, the public schools are doing these very things under our eyes. They are solving the problem of making education fit into the program of life as nature reveals it. They are creating an environment of buildings, equipments, curricula and teachers to which the child can respond in terms of his own feeling, thinking and doing. Our children go to school in the morning eager for their work and happy in the opportunity to go. They return at night full of enthusiasm over what they have been doing, talking and living over in their plays the tasks of the schoolroom. The interests of home are carried over into the school, and the interests of the school over into the home. They are one, and the child's life is unbroken. All this is said of the better type of schools, but they are common and becoming

more so. There can be no question that if religious education is to be continued under the auspices of the church and Sunday-school, religious educators will sometime do what secular educators have done. They will create an environment of buildings, equipments, curricula and teachers that will really give children something to respond to that will call out their natural, that is to say, their best selves. Children will cease to be taken out of a life that, with all its limitations, does give them large opportunities for self-expression six days in the week, and, for a short hour or two on Sunday, be subjected to instruction that is mostly verbal and offers little chance for self-activity.

The problem of religious self-expression in children will be solved along three lines, corresponding to the three modes of such self-expression. First, greater emphasis will be placed upon the instinctive and feeling response of children. That is to say, the natural tendencies and attitudes of mind will be consulted. Expressed in still other terms, children's spontaneous interests will be regarded as indices of their needs, perverted it may be but nevertheless significant, and will be accepted as guides both in eliminating evil tendencies and in strengthening good tendencies. It will be seen that, pedagogically as well as scripturally, "Out of the heart are the issues of life", and that all attempts to crush down or root out a child's fundamental instincts and feelings must weaken the selfhood and destroy that personal initiative which is so essential to a vigorous life. It will be seen, too, that it is just as dangerous to stimulate precocious religious feelings as it is to stimulate precocity of any kind. Premature feelings mean premature decay of feelings, or perversion in directions of mental disease. Indeed, it will sometime be recognized that what is called religious feeling is really a synthesis of many feelings not ordinarily considered religious. These latter are intrinsically religious, however, and, if properly nurtured, will naturally yield their religious content to the more complex emotions of later life, enriching and ennobling them.

Again, greater emphasis will be placed in religious instruction upon self-activity in thinking. It will be seen that the power of selective thought is intrinsically more important for religion than the parrot-like repetition of words, imperfectly understood. It will be seen that to get the symbols of truth into the mind, whether they be the words of the Bible or of a creed, avails nothing

at all unless the soul reacts to them with the intelligence and interest that come from significant experience. Words are dead things unless we have that in our heads and our hearts that can vitalize them. Religious instruction that does not deal with material to which the minds of students can react intelligently, arrests the powers of thought, produces apathy of feeling, and therefore destroys both the capacity for seeking truth and the interest in it. For this reason, the selection of Biblical material that lies too much outside of children's intelligence and interest, and the dogmatic attitude that discourages free, individual thought in young people and adults, render imbecile the intellectual life of any church and condemn it to hopeless inferiority in religious standards and conduct. There is no sphere of life where abridgment of self-expression is so fatal to human growth and achievement as in the intellectual order.

Finally, greater emphasis will be laid upon motor expression in religious education. That is to say, attention will be more and more directed to the executive function of righteousness. It is all very well to feel righteously and to think righteously, but the final test of both is the deed. How to make religion motor and executive is indeed one of the greatest of problems, personally and socially. Religious educators must, and will, devise some means of helping boys and girls to work out their religious feelings and ideas. The heterogeneous manual exercises over sand-maps, the singing in choirs, the taking part in prayer-meetings will not suffice. These activities may be valuable, or next to worthless, according to the spirit and conditions under which they are performed. Motor, or executive, righteousness must come nearer to life than these activities can possibly come. It must be of a type that affects the life of the doer and that of his fellowman. It must take the form of doing deeds of virtue, honesty, kindness, patriotism and the like. A church and Sunday-school that can make their religious instruction efficient through an organized body of righteous workers, in the home, business, politics and throughout social life everywhere, will have realized this ideal. Such an outcome of education in objective results that embody the ideas and impulses imparted through instruction, is the present aim and often the accomplished fact, in many of our best public schools. There is no reason why the same should not be true of the agencies of religious education.