

This article was downloaded by: [University of Birmingham]

On: 08 January 2015, At: 04:13

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## 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>

### CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH IN RELATION TO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Henry B. Robins Ph.D.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion and Missions, Rochester Theological Seminary

Published online: 10 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Henry B. Robins Ph.D. (1915) CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH IN RELATION TO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP, Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association, 10:5, 473-481, DOI: [10.1080/0034408150100510](https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408150100510)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0034408150100510>

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>

## CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH IN RELATION TO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

HENRY B. ROBINS, PH.D.,

*Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion and Missions,  
Rochester Theological Seminary*

If it is to be of value, this discussion must deal with more than the mere technique of induction to church membership. If it were confined to that matter alone, it would be necessary at least to assume a positive background of religious nurture. The value of church membership unsupported by the actual experience and practice of religion would be very small indeed. In fact it is the religious life itself which is of chief importance, and church membership has its value as it promotes this life. The religious life, however, is social as well as individual, and cannot be fully lived apart from the Christian community, yet it may find a very considerable development apart from church membership. The child may be to all intents and purposes *in* the church without being technically in the membership of the church. It is a very generally cherished conviction of Protestant Christendom to-day that the child should, in this sense at least, be reared in the church, so that it should never be able to recall a time when it was in fact, or was even thought to be, an alien from the religious community.

Protestant Christendom, in respect to the church membership of children and youth, presents wide variation in both theory and practice. Yet, with some lingering traces of exception, it is fair to say that evangelical Christians no longer believe in sacramental salvation. Though some sections of the church retain a technique which was, in whole or in part, the product of an age which did believe in sacramental salvation, Protestant Christendom is pretty well agreed that no religious rite or series of rites alone can induct the child into the actual life of religion. The radical party of protest in the Reformation swung so far away from the sacramental theory of salvation and its accompanying technique that it had for generations neither a helpful theory of the religious status of childhood nor an edifying practice. The party which retained the sacramental technique developed a nobler and more nearly adequate ideal of religious nurture than did the extreme party of protest,

but both parties endeavored to determine the nature of the child and the technique for dealing with it by biblical or theological appeal. They had no notion of a psychological understanding of childhood.

In consequence of this inheritance, in almost all discussions of this matter in our own time we find two sets of notions mingling, the theological and the psychological. The theological question concerns regeneration and conversion; the psychological question involves nurture and instruction. Both liturgist and non-liturgist usually feel that it is necessary to deal with both questions. But they have somewhat different ways of dealing with them. The liturgist says that the rite of initiation into the church involves so much "that the poetic and symbolic word 'regeneration' is a fair expression of it"; yet he does not permit us to think of infant baptism as essentially sacramental magic, for he says, "nothing happens in the heart of the child when the water of baptism is poured upon his head. The change which is (thus) valued or declared is one of environment." Though the process of induction into church membership is not complete until confirmation is administered to the child at about the age of fifteen, it will be noticed that the vexed question of "regeneration" is completely disposed of, practically shelved, and with it the matter of "conversion." What remains is a process of nurture in religion.

But the non-liturgist cannot so easily dispose of the problem of "regeneration." "Conversion," however, is the matter of his immediate concern; "regeneration," the obverse side of "conversion," is God's affair. The non-liturgist believes in the use of means to effect "conversion," and the means usually employed are those of the adult "revival"—sometimes on a reduced "Decision Day" scale. Even after profession of faith has been made, it is quite usual to probe for some more manifest witness or token that the individual is actually "regenerate." Thus it is that the liturgist quietly shelves the theological issue and devotes his time to the psychological task, while the rest of us engaged in the same business of nurture have a lot of heart-burnings and misgivings about the theological status of the child. If we could but be rid of some of our theological impedimenta, it would greatly help! Of course we all trust that somehow God will work his will in the lives of these dear children. But, "does God dwell in gaps"? Are we to suppose that he can do his work in the human heart only at a single stroke, in in-

stantaneous, cataclysmic fashion? Why should it be deemed necessary to shut God out of his world of law and growth — the slow, silent, and yet confessedly formative years? Why cannot their fruitage, if it be a holy life, be reckoned as truly his work as the results of a single upheaval?

Perhaps the shortest path to practical agreement is the study of the child himself. A close, patient, sympathetic study of child nature alone can supply us with an adequate theoretical basis and technique of religious education. There are some things which the genetic psychology of childhood has already made pretty clear. In the first place, genetic psychology has framed for us a view of human nature which is different from the inherited theological view. The classic theological view held human nature to be a static quantum, quite vitiated and evil in essence. An early revulsion from this extreme view expressed the equally extreme opinion that human nature as represented by the infant is quite ideal and flawless, the little one "trailing clouds of glory" as he enters the gates of life. Genetic psychology, however, discovers in the instinctive equipment of that little child much that is imperfect and wrong — a whole series of lower instincts which fruitfully served an earlier racial stage, but are now archaic. This archaic series clamors for recognition and exercise, it is possessed of great biological momentum. In consequence, unless the individual is laid hold upon by society, the archaic portion of his instinctive equipment sublimated, and the still serviceable portion of it disciplined, he will grow up with dominant characteristics which can but make him an enemy both to himself and to society — a "sinner," in theological language. To adopt the complacent optimism of "*laissez faire*" would be sheerest folly, for human nature is not "all right" in the sense that it can safely be left without discipline. And the place to look for the activity of God is just in the disciplinary agencies and processes rather than in some special and unrelated irruption into these processes.

Again, genetic psychology is framing a view of the religious capacities of childhood. The very notion of growth itself guarantees a difference between the succeeding stages of development; it assures us that the child, if it have a religious experience at all, will not have an adult experience. It seems, however, that the religious capacity of the little child has been underrated. It has been quite usual to dismiss the subject with some more or less extended reference to the atmosphere and the

habits of religion, and, to be sure, these are the important matters in early childhood. But it is probable that there is a considerable capacity for personal experimental religion in early childhood. God as the loving Father may be presented earlier and to more purpose than we have been wont to allow. The filial response is native to the soul of the little child, and the parental instinct, which begins very early to manifest itself in the cherishing of a little brother or sister, or of some pet, opens the way to an appreciation of the feeling of God toward his children. Childish trust in God and response to the divine wish but await a proper and continued presentation and recognition of the fact of God in the environing adult life. Still, childish interest is fleeting, and it remains true that religion, all through childhood, will make its most essential impression through the mastery of certain habits of devotion and expression and through its persistent and pervasive presence in the environing life.

Again, careful study of the developing life has greatly broadened our conception of the factors which play into the formation of character and the life of religion. We recognize that many limitations and abnormalities have a purely physiological basis. Further, we realize the importance of the social forces which play upon the child in his ordinary experience, in the home, in the school, and upon the playground. These forces are felt to be quite determinative in the formation and fixation of character. We realize, as once we did not, that religious education can never accomplish its ends apart from the inspiration and leadership of this larger life.

With this point of view in mind, it is quite apparent that the process of religious nurture is imperative and cannot begin too early, and that no element of religion should be deferred which can have significance for the child. If church membership can minister in any significant fashion to the religious needs of the child, it ought not to be denied him. If the child is included, in intelligent and helpful fashion, in the ministries of the church, his whole religious need is met. If he is not included in the ministries of the church, formal church membership adds nothing. Now formal membership cannot have the significance for the child that it has for the adolescent. The child's interest is evanescent; his ideals are fragmentary and more or less ephemeral; the constancies in his life are those which rest upon constancies in his environment, though many of these become pretty well

fixed as habits by the end of childhood, and are in so far personal. The ideals of the church become significant for him only as their energy is released through the society which nurtures him. The inclusion of the child in the ministries of the church guarantees all that the church can do for him. It guarantees the presentation of the idea of God, instruction in the practice of prayer, the inculcation of reverence, the moralization of conduct. These belong to childhood's religion, and none of them can safely be put off until adolescence.

But the child does not have that sense of the significance of the group which church membership should imply, much less does he have the appreciation of ideals and the prompting to commit himself to them which is a primary pre-requisite to church membership. The confirmation plan of the liturgical churches, whether designedly or not, is framed to meet this fact. The liturgical churches do not intend to deprive the child of anything which is actually significant, yet they do withhold full membership until a time when it can be intelligent and significant. The non-liturgical churches, both those which administer infant baptism and those which do not, have been less clear in their minds as to how to proceed. The liturgist, satisfied with what the act itself does or declares, puts no other test than the catechetical in the way of the candidate. But the non-liturgist, in lieu of the catechetical test or in addition thereto, has been wont to place the demand for some token of a "change of heart." The liturgist's program fixes the age pretty definitely, while the non-liturgist has no standardised technique and no established age for working any plan which he may devise. His one inexorable theoretic demand is evidence of a "change of heart"; it is quite clear, however, that this demand has not been carried to the logical limit within recent years. Now evidence of such a "change" might be forthcoming at an age considerably earlier than the liturgist's standard indicates for confirmation; and, as a matter of fact, children of eight and nine are not seldom received into the fellowship of the non-liturgical churches.

While it is quite true that such children may grow to a happy maturity in the actual life of religion, it is quite certain that the act of final public committal to that life is not and cannot be as significant to them as it would be if they entered the church at an age nearer that indicated by the confirmation standard. It is but fair to say that a "decision," so-called, at eight or nine, will hardly prove of any significance at all in cases where there

is not an eminently favorable background of home nurture and activity in religion. The child of eight or nine cannot hold fast a new ideal which is counter to that dominant in his closest environment. The adolescent, however, sometimes does just that thing, and makes good as a Christian against heavy odds. The two situations are very different. The child of eight or nine is still very highly suggestible, as a little experimentation at any children's meeting will show. He readily makes almost any demonstration he is called upon to make, and almost as readily forgets all about it, for his interests are transitory. But the lad of twelve or fourteen not seldom makes decisions which are actually determinative in the formation of his character.

The moral significance of induction into full church membership is primarily that of committal to a life-ideal. Such being the case, membership should be deferred until a time when it can signify in some proper sense an intelligent and personal choice. The non-liturgical churches are in great need of a standard in the matter — not a standard based upon ecclesiastical agreement, but upon a careful ascertainment of childhood's religious capacities and needs. The confirmation age of the liturgical churches is that most commonly urged. That is surely late enough to assure the element of personal choice as well as that of intelligence. If an emotional experience approximating that of adult conversion were to be insisted upon as prerequisite, we should be most likely to secure it through the use of an adapted technique at about sixteen. But this fact, even when apparently supported by the statistics which indicate sixteen as the age of most frequent "conversion," does not settle the question. Such statistics have been gathered from religious bodies whose technique of evangelism is controlled by adult standards, and they simply show what is the rule, not what ought to be. No sort of census-taking at all can settle this matter; it is a question to be determined by a competent study of the religious life of childhood and youth.

As an offset to such statistics, attention ought to be called to the increasing number of indubitably Christian people who ask for church membership at an earlier age than sixteen, without being at all able to date any sudden experience, and who later prove to be among the staunchest and most vitally religious supporters of the church. A single instance of this type ought to present a mighty interrogation as to the soundness of that view which would require of youth such a cataclysmic experience as occurs normally only in connection with the dominant type of

adult conversion. It is not desirable that the lad of twelve or thirteen, reared amid the ministries of the church, shall approximate this type of adult conversion. At the same time, it is desirable that the day on which he unites with the church shall stand out in his memory as the time of definite committal to the Christian life.

It is true that twelve or thirteen is an age somewhat earlier than the confirmation standard, but to many it seems an even more opportune time for presenting the matter of religious committal and church membership. It is the time of a new and powerful social sense, limited as yet to the group. There is no time within the period of early adolescence when the church can afford to overlook the group, especially at the time of entrance upon the adolescent period is this influence likely to be powerful and determinative. Such methods as we may devise must make use of the "gang" or the "set" in order to be most effective, for religious committal is most often reached through its influence. There is great gain in getting the momentum of this initial group impulse, as there is in anticipating the storm and stress of the pubescent crisis, when there are enough other matters to occupy attention.

In addition to the standard "revival" method of accomplishing what the non-liturgical churches feel ought to be done for the adolescent, there are two other typical ways of meeting the issue. "Decision Day" is quite commonly observed, while other churches have the "pastor's class." The two methods are not mutually exclusive, and sometimes use is made of both of them, instruction following decision. It should be said of "Decision Day" that, as ordinarily managed, it has most of the perils of mass evangelism. Where this method only is followed, the real instruction upon which alone an intelligent decision can rest is not supplied, and the whole issue turns upon some overt physical act, as going forward or signing a card. The emotionalism of such Decision Days as are counted successful is itself apt to create a wrong impression as to what religion really is.

The "pastor's class" is a far more satisfactory, if less spectacular means, of leading the adolescent to religious committal and to church membership. In such a class the more essential matters of personal religion can be taken up, the final subjects of consideration being the church itself, the meaning of its faith and symbols, and the significance of membership. Such a class may be made a regular curriculum class in the church school,



into which all pupils who reach the designated age shall enter. It is quite possible to arrange the work so that the curriculum course in personal religion shall be given by some one else than the pastor, while direct preparation for church membership is afforded by a class meeting on weekday afternoons, with boys and girls in separate sections, and the pastor in charge of each. Such classes are usually held for a few weeks preceding Easter, at which time children so prepared are received into the full membership of the church. Whether or not this method is adopted, it seems quite clear that some method should be devised for the presentation of the issues of personal religion and such instruction as seems prerequisite to church membership to every child in the care of the church when he reaches the age of twelve or thirteen. Furthermore, the technique of such induction to church membership should be carefully distinguished and wholly dissociated from that of the adult revival.

One wonders what proportion of youth in the care of the liturgical churches pass the confirmation period without becoming related to the church by full membership. Probably the non-liturgical churches lose a greater number of those who were throughout childhood more or less within their care than do the liturgical churches. And it is quite likely that this will continue to be the case, whatever plan may be adopted for dealing with the matter. The very fact that the non-liturgical churches place a greater emphasis upon the committal element — and quite properly — adds to the probability. It is this sort of people — once within the ministries of the church — who furnish the most promising material for adult evangelism. But it does not follow, having passed the standard age without religious committal, that they are to be turned over to the revivalist. The surest approach to them will be personal, which is not to say that just any interested person ought to make such an approach. A personal approach made by that man or woman who leads the group to which the individual in question belongs in its recreational, expressional, or social activities will be most likely to be effective. This is but to say that if the church does not provide for the social and recreational leadership of adolescents by competent men and women, it may fail utterly to get a second hearing with such adolescents as have deferred religious committal. If the adolescent group to which the individual belongs is mainly outside the church, difficulties are multiplied; but if they are mainly in the church, and have vital, sympathetic

leadership, they so reinforce the personal appeal that when it is made it is usually effective. It is only when these wider areas in which youth so largely lives are brought within the care and sympathy of the church that church membership becomes vital instead of nominal.

The longer religious committal and church membership are deferred, the more likely they are to involve radical spiritual crisis and resolution. The more fully confirmed the youth becomes in habits which are contrary to the spirit of Christianity, the more unlikely he is to break with them, and the greater the probability, if such a break comes, that it will approximate the abrupt type of adult conversion. And, even if he breaks with the past, nurture has again to take up the task of making him a real Christian. Without intelligent and incessant religious nurture, church membership has a minimum of meaning. But with a proper nurture, with constant and inspiring leadership, the boys and girls in our churches will pass naturally into the full understanding and fellowship of the faith, and thus into the full membership of the church.

---

### SECURING FIRST-HAND DATA AS TO THE RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

HUGH H. HARTSHORNE, Ph.D.

*Professor, Union Theological Seminary, New York.*

The need for first-hand information concerning the religious development of children may not, at first sight, be clear. We seem to have been getting along very well without it. Even in recent years, altho the purpose and work of the Sunday school have been so well defined, we have not really appreciated this need for more adequate knowledge. We have been blinded by splendid generalizations about the aims of the Church school, and have imagined that as soon as we know our aim we are thereby equipped to carry it out. It is the fact that this is partly true that has kept us from seeing that it is not wholly true. We do most certainly need to know what our Sunday school product should be before we can intelligently try to produce it. But we also need to know the process by which the end is reached. In other words, we must have standards of process as well as standards of output, in education as in anything else.