



SHALL THEY GO TO SUNDAY SCHOOL?

MONTGOMERY MAJOR

MUCH has been written and more preached concerning this ungodly younger generation of to-day. Amid novels and sermons filled with scorn and admonition, it is something of a relief to discover even one book in which there is an endeavor to understand rather than reprove. It is time, perhaps, for youth to make an answer to these accusations. We of the younger generation are as much at fault as our elders. They have not endeavored to understand our viewpoint, but we have not attempted to make them comprehend. If you say that this generation is reckless, hasty, rash, and unorthodox, I must agree; but if you denounce it as irreligious, thoughtless, or sinful, I must politely beg to differ. Unorthodox it is, but certainly not thoughtless.

There was a time when the Bible was a sealed book of enigmas, and only a chosen few were permitted to solve its mysteries and translate its teachings to the many. Youth did not think, for that was the task of pastors. To-day the shackles of conventionalized creeds are being shattered. Youth thinks, often unwisely, frequently crudely, yet it thinks.

But what does youth think? There are very few who have attempted to answer that question, very few who have even asked it. But that question cannot be ignored if the Church is to be the force it should be in the lives of those who will create the future. For the Church is losing the young people! Foolish young

people? No, foolish Church! Youth marches on, and it behooves the Church to keep step or be lost like any straggler and sluggard.

There is, of course, blame for both. The Church is too conservative, youth too progressive; one too hesitant, the other too impetuous. Yet the fact remains that youth lacks an established and formulated religion solely because the Church has failed to provide one sufficiently logical and liberal to interest and attract the normally intelligent young people of to-day. It is our contention that we have not deserted the Church but that the Church has driven us from its shelter and abandoned us. We are well aware of the fact that we need a religion, and it is the Church's duty to provide us with one in which we can believe. If the Church fails us, then we can justly say that it is not Christian, for it is not going into all the world and preaching the gospel to every living creature.

But even more important than presenting to us a faith that we can accept is the duty of presenting a faith to those of the next generation, now in the Sunday school, that they can believe. Most of us are already lost to the Church forever, and so will they be lost if the Sunday school does not change. That the Sunday school can be a menace to religious belief and faith may seem a novel or unwarranted assertion, yet it is undoubtedly true. Higher education and modern scientific conceptions have most unjustly received the blame for youth's hostility to the Church. College does crystallize the inchoate doubts of young people, or, at least, it serves to provide the inwardly rebellious with excuses and arguments for that rebellion; but the prime cause of revolt against the established faith arises in the Sunday school, and in the Sunday school, if anywhere, it must be met and remedied.

There is, and always has been, an erroneous idea that children do not question religion, based doubtless upon the fact that they do not openly avow their doubts and questions, due also to the implicit faith which a certain number always possess. Yet it is unwise to judge, from the spoken faith of a few, what the silent many believe. Children do doubt and question very early in life. From their own observations and deductions they form those doubts while yet untouched by the controversies of their elders; and modern education has been unjustly condemned for what it, perhaps, encourages but certainly does not commence.

Children, even children of seven and eight, are possessed of

unusual powers of observation and an uncanny gift for logic — facts so well known that they are part of a novelist's common tools in plot-building. All who have dealt intimately with children should be able to testify to the validity of this statement. These gifts the Church has been content to ignore in its average Sunday school work, considering, perhaps, that it is its duty to teach and not reason, and that it is the child's duty to believe and not question.

The deleterious effect of contradictory teachings upon the faith of children deserves an essay, since it is a subject completely neglected by teachers' guides though it is of primal importance in religious pedagogy. The fact that two Christians can dispute religious interpretations and yet both remain Christians of excellent standing is a paradox which has confused many adults, and it is no wonder that it baffles and troubles children. Thus, when it is the misfortune of a Sunday school class to receive at various times religious training from two teachers who interpret the Bible and their creed diversely, the resulting atheism and agnosticism of the more intelligent members of the class is not surprising. If these pupils had remained unshaken in their belief, then the result would have been surprising.

It is difficult enough for children to understand how there can be so many denominations, each of individual and different creed, all professing faith in the same God and Bible, and all apparently right. In the days when Baptist believed Methodist damned, Catholic believed Protestant doomed, it was not so difficult to account for denominations. All save the church of your choice were wrong and damned. Now that it is conceded no one is damned, they offer a difficult problem for childish minds to solve; and when these children discover that even members of their own church and denomination are inharmonious in their beliefs and that each Sunday school teacher deduces a different meaning from each lesson, they arrive at the conclusion that since so many respected and respectable people differ, none of them knows what he is talking about. Nor is this conclusion illogical and surprising, when we consider the conditions which gave it birth.

Once the child has arrived at this decision, although he may attend Sunday school until he is old enough successfully to defy his parents' wishes, the injury is done; and all the teaching and preaching of the years between his first insistent doubt and his obstinate revolt are futile, for they will not avail to alter his

opinions one iota. The child has decided to dislike religion and he will stubbornly abide by that decision despite argument, lesson, or command. He has become that most obdurate of listeners, the mentally unreceptive.

Children are critical, and their doubts must be met and satisfied, their criticism invited and refuted, their questions requested and answered. It is not enough to teach, the teaching must be sustained by inquiry and concrete fact. It is not enough to say "do" or "believe." It is necessary to explain why. Teach the Bible as an inspired Book devoid of error, if you must, but do not fail to admit that its interpreters are liable to error.

Of no less importance than consistency in teaching is the basis of teaching, for religious belief instilled into the child's mind upon a fallacious principle is not lasting in the face of modern religious agitation. It is criminal to teach children to believe that the foundation of all Christianity is to be found in the miracles and the Virgin Birth of Christ. It is an invitation to agnosticism to teach that Jehovah actually spoke in an audible and intelligible voice of thunder and that Moses actually saw God visibly upon Mount Sinai. It is folly to say that God's spirit, clothed as a cloud of smoke by day and as a luminous pillar of fire by night, guided the Israelites across the desert; and then proclaim that Christianity rests upon these and other miraculous signs and events and that shorn of these there is, and can be, no Christian religion. The child soon begins to query why these phenomena are not recurrent in our day, why their own minister cannot cure the blind or call down manna from Heaven. They want to see a miracle, and no one can blame them.

When they learn that no one can satisfy their curiosity, they begin to think that their teachers are not good Christians. If they were, they would be able to walk upon the waters and turn water into wine. Good Christians, they argue, should be able to do whatever the apostles could. And what else can they believe? Later, when they begin to study the laws of the universe which are in direct contradiction to the miracles and learn to apply their common sense, which ridicules them, they cease to believe. For their religion, based upon miracles, has been destroyed along with their faith in those miracles. As for those who were never impressed by Biblical tales of marvels at all, since they seemed only vague fairy stories of a distant age, can a faith built upon such perishable trivialities remain?

Not long ago I had a discussion upon religious subjects with a rather liberal young Catholic, and we conversed quite amiably about the vicarious sacrifice and other controversial points, without heat or animosity. We simply did not agree. But when we approached the doctrine of transubstantiation — which I despise for its mediæval absurdity — and when I endeavored aggressively to show him why he should not believe that the bread and wine at communion actually became the body and blood of Christ, he refused after the first round of arguments to continue the discussion. He admitted that he was afraid I might convince him that transubstantiation was a foolish relic of antiquated theology; and that if I did, his religion would be destroyed. He had been wrongly taught; and sooner or later, someone will break past the barrier of his faith and convince him. When that occurs, he is lost to the Church and Christianity forever. He has had his religion based on a wrong foundation.

Consider a child taught that the Bible is the true and inerrant word of God, delivered to us as His complete and final mandate and revelation. He reads that Joshua stopped the movement of the sun — then he goes to school and learns that the earth moves around the sun. Is the child to be blamed if his faith is shaken? It is no wonder that he begins to doubt the whole fabric of a faith whose precepts scholars cannot harmonize.

Children must not be asked to believe blindly what it is impossible for their elders to believe without much philosophy and interpretation. They must be taught that religion is a progressive and culminative spiritual endeavor for betterment and must be shown how the whole conception of God and religion has progressed and improved through the Old Testament into the New. It must be explained to them that the ancient Biblical cosmology is not God's but the accepted belief of the time. They must learn that the "angry God" of Isaiah is in reality only a misinterpretation of the "merciful Father" of Jesus. They must not be taught to believe in Christianity because of the miracles, but, if you will, in the miracles because of Christianity.

In the critical period of adolescence a grave danger lies in presenting Christianity sentimentally. No one resents sentimentality quite so quickly as a child, and no one so instinctively realizes its weakness as an argument and as an appeal. There are children to whom the idea of being God's little lambs appeals, but those who are destined to force themselves into the notice

of the world seldom belongs to that group. I presume that the Church desires to hold in its membership the creative leaders, and these, as children, are almost always the ones who grow surfeited with the idea of being God's little lambs, who would much rather be naughty than good. The perfect little ladies and gentlemen are easier to deal with and more acceptable to the lovers of the characterless; but, although the meek may inherit the earth, the strong and aggressive will make it worth inheriting, and of these are the naughty children.

Children love the saccharine, but only in candy; it appeals to their palates but not to their minds. And so it is wise to confine sugar to deserts and eliminate it from Sunday school lessons.

It is obviously unwise to preach a gospel of fire and brimstone to children of an age which is too apt to inquire curiously where hell is and expect it to be located geographically. The cosmology of Milton, the theology of Jonathan Edwards sufficed for their day and time, but in our day their theories appear mythical and fabulous even to a child. Once it was safe enough to make congregations tremble before the awful picture of "sinners in the hands of an angry God." But to-day our enlightened children are not to be coerced by threats of hypothetical punishment. They are not afraid of a damnation the nature of which they cannot conceive.

Modern Sunday school training, even under the best conditions, is not vital, is illogical, is absurd, is reactionary, and is futile. Religion must be vital and necessary in its presentation to hold people who will themselves deal in vital and necessary problems. Religion must be impressively valuable and earnestly progressive. It is the duty of the Sunday school to teach religion so that it shall be. Children should be taught sanely and quietly; they should be reasoned with and not commanded. Do not think them devoid of reasoning powers. Do not tell them to believe because they ought to believe. Tell them to believe because there is a valid reason for belief.

Their religion should be based upon the teachings of Jesus, so that if the miracles and the Virgin Birth and the attendant theological hodgepodge crumble, they have their faith unshaken. They should not be bullied by threats of hell or bribed by promise of heaven. Remember this final admonition: You can always drive young people out of the Church by careless teaching, but you cannot drive them into it!

THE DECLINE OF ARISTOCRACY

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SCIENTIFICALLY speaking, it must be the ambition of every nation to be governed by an aristocracy — that is to say, by the best of its citizens. But as there are no means of discovering with any certainty who the best are, this purely abstract interpretation of aristocracy must be set aside and the popular meaning of the word substituted. Aristocracy has come to mean a titled class of nobility with their descendants, distinguished not by ability, moral superiority, or intellectual eminence, but by their birth — which is not always synonymous with what is loosely known as superior breeding.

Although titles may be conferred originally for merit and achievement and are a form of public recognition of special capacity, as time passes their hereditary character enlists into the ranks of the aristocracy people whose sole claim to distinction is that they are descended from the original holder of the title. When titles are conferred, as they have been increasingly in the last hundred and fifty years in Great Britain, for exclusively political considerations or frankly as an exchange for a lump sum of money, the claim of the recipient to a specially privileged position in the machine of government becomes very difficult to defend.

Nowhere in the world, except in England and perhaps in Spain and Roumania, is any claim made by a titled aristocracy for class privileges and constitutional prerogatives. In France the aristocracy of the royalist and empire periods have long disappeared and the remnant lurks only in the backwaters of society. In Germany they vanished with the monarchies. In Russia they have fled the country. Elsewhere they have ceased to exist except as isolated units, clinging to ancient titles.

The rise of democracy — that is to say, the gradual participation of the people, directly and indirectly, in the business of government, and the breaking down of the barriers which hitherto have prevented individual men and women from reaching the highest posts in legislation or administration — must necessarily involve the decline of a privileged class. It may be brought about by a revolution, the establishment of a republic, or some other national upheaval. It may be brought about by a natural