

GIFT OF

Dr. Solomon B. Freehof

THE MODERN CHILD AND RELIGION

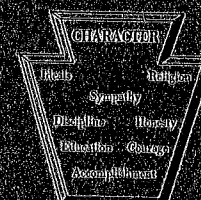
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THE EBB AND FLOW OF RELIGIOUS FEELING
IN ADOLESCENCE

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Adolescence is a period of physical safety. At no time of life is there less danger of bodily disease than in "the teens." Yet, although this is a period of physical safety, it is, judging by statistics, a time of great mental peril. The curve of the frequency of insanity takes an alarming leap upward, and the criminal world gets its greatest number of recruits in the period of adolescence. In other words, this time of life may be well described as being a period of physical security and spiritual peril. For that reason the problem of adolescence (every stage of life presents its specific problems) is primarily a psychic one. What the young child needs most is tender physical care, but the adolescent needs above all the helpfulness of patient understanding and spiritual sympathy.

The bodily differences between adolescence and childhood may be summed up in the general explanation that in adolescence the human personality achieves the development of the reproductive powers. The sudden changes in the human body are due to the fact that the human animal has ceased to be merely nutritive (providing for its own growth) and is beginning to develop with reference to the perpetuation of the race. All these physical changes and sudden developments, this turning from nutritive childhood to reproductive adolescence, are accompanied by the great psychic rearrangements characteristic of this stage of life. It is impossible to study the ebb of religious feeling in adolescence

without an understanding of the whole mental change which the individual undergoes at this time of life.

The mental changes in adolescence may be described briefly as follows: In the first place, there is a measurable increase in the sense intake. The sense perceptions become much fuller and clearer. Actually and measurably new color differences are now detected. Delicate differences in sounds are more precisely discerned. The sense of touch grows more sensitive. It is as if the doorways of knowledge, the five senses, which in childhood were but half opened, with just a trickle of information filtering through to the mind, were now in adolescence opened wide, and a great flood of sensation enters into the consciousness and threatens to overwhelm it.

The results of this new physical awareness must always be watched closely; because if the individual is unable to cope with the great mass of additional fact which the world now pours in upon his consciousness, there is always a danger of his being overwhelmed and the personality becoming dazed and unable to find itself in the new world which has strangely become more visual, more auditory, and more tactile. That is why the increase of insanity and mental thwarting comes precisely at this time.

But if the individual learns how to cope with all of this new sense material, if he is not swept off his feet by its entrance into his consciousness, this stage of life will mark the beginning of the aesthetic understanding. It is at this time that the individual can learn to understand beauty, the beauty of image, of form, and of sound. The love of art can be attained most easily in the time of our adolescence. As more sense data come into the mind, the mind has more material with which to work, and it begins to trace relationships be-

tween new facts and old facts, and thus there comes an increase in the rational powers. The adolescent thinks much differently and much more deeply than the child. Most of child thinking is direct reaction to outside stimulus. The adolescent is able to do secondary thinking, to see subtler relationships. He talks now, not merely of his parents or his friends, but begins to discuss and to think of life and its meaning, life and its destiny, and of all the far-flung conclusions to which people come when they delve deeper into the implications of the facts of existence.

This deepening of the rational powers, if the individual does not use it properly, can be just as negative as the increase of the sense perceptions. For if the adolescent finding in himself new powers of argument and reason does not know what to do with these instrumentalities, he is likely to become that carping objector that some adolescent boys and girls are. He is just using his new mental capacity against everything that presents itself to him. But if he is led aright, if he is given the right opportunity, this deepening of the mental powers may lead him into his first great cultural experiences, and he may at this time of life get his first great love for science and its cool, rational pursuit of truth. He may, if he is fortunate, learn to discover "how charming is divine philosophy." One result or the other can ensue: a constant objection to anything that is presented to him, or a deepened understanding of science and philosophy.

As the sense impressions grow keener and richer and the mind deepens, the individual begins to know how to live within himself, and to study his own consciousness. There grows up within him an awareness of himself as a personality. Himself, his own ideals, his fate, and his future become matters of prime interest to him. He wants to be respected

as a personality. That sense of individuality may show itself merely in a rebellion against any authority which tries to restrict his personality. Thus we find the adolescent constantly fighting for his own liberty against real or against fancied oppression. But if that sense of his personality develops properly, the adolescent may see visions of himself as a knight errant riding forth to redress the wrongs of the world. He will think of himself as the leader of great movements, the doer of great deeds, the initiator of noble achievements; he will dream of remolding the world according to heart's desire. His new consciousness of his own personality will make of him either a rebel against the world which he fancies restricts him, or a courageous idealist.

As his personality becomes strong, he gradually reaches out for kinship with the other personalities. No human being is as sensitive to the personalities and can like and dislike with such unerring accuracy as an adolescent. Out of that sensitiveness to personality he develops a sense of society. He wants to fit himself into society, either with his gang, which will mislead him, or with some great ethical movement in which socially minded people work in order to lessen the pain of life and to increase its joy. All these psychic changes occur in varying degrees. Their effect on any particular individual is always uncertain. The increase of the sense impressions may lead to an overwhelming of the personality or to an awakening of the aesthetic sense, the deepening of the rational powers which may lead to mere disagreeable contrariness in any discussion or to an understanding of the great intellectual enterprises of mankind, the awakening of the sense of personality, and may arouse the adolescent either to rebellion against all authority or to the visualizing of himself as a great leader. The dawn of the social sense

through sensitiveness to other personalities may lead to gang spirit or to an understanding of the significance of the great social movements.

It is not surprising that all these possibilities have a powerful effect upon the religious attitudes of the individual. There is hardly an adolescent who is indifferent to the idea of religion. He may be bitterly opposed to all religious concepts or he may passionately avow a religious point of view; but it is seldom that you cannot succeed in getting some religious reaction from an adolescent, because these four elements in his development have direct bearing upon the religious point of view. Either it will make him bitterly antireligious, or make him strongly religious, and both are equally normal for the adolescent.

The aesthetic sense which arises among adolescents is closely akin to the religious sense. The aesthetic sense sees beneath the material things a deeper meaning, and beyond the transient manifestations of nature, the permanent significance of beauty. This attitude is so near to the religious point of view which sees the eternal behind the transient that one can readily understand how an adolescent may frequently come to a religious awakening through his aesthetic sense. He sees the streams and the meadows and the trees as outward manifestations of the inner soul of the universe. Hence an adolescent is very likely to be a religious pantheist, if his aesthetic sense happens to expand that far.

On the other hand, his very intellectual development may lead him to oppose whatever has been hitherto accepted without question. He reacts bitterly against whatever is given to him as a dogma; when told "This you must believe," he asks "Why? What is the reason? What is the proof? I accept no dogma." The adolescent is naturally anti-dogmat-

ic, and because his personality as well as his intellect is developing, he will not even accept a non-dogmatic religious point of view if it happens to be given to him with the authority of other people. If he is told, even in the case of a liberal religion, "This is the religion of your group, the religion of your parents; be loyal to it," he will rebel. He is an individual. He is fighting for himself. He wants to know what that religion might mean to him as a separate person. Thus both his intellect and his consciousness of his independent personality often lead him to rebel against inherited religion, whether it be dogmatic or not. However, the social sense of the adolescent often leads him to a religious point of view, especially in the Western world, under the Judeo-Christian environment, where the main pathway to religious understanding is the life of social righteousness. He may, in this environment, seeing goodness and truth and mutual help express itself in social institutions, come to an understanding that goodness and truth are not mere customs among us, but, as Judaism and Christianity say, are part of the structure of the whole universe. Adolescents often appear indifferent to religion, but that indifference is only apparent. It is the mental immobility, not of relaxation, but the immobility of a pair of wrestlers whose forces are strained against each other and have reached the tenseness of deadlock. One tendency within him leads him to hate religion. Another leads him to love it. One brings him out toward the world. Another brings him back to himself.

What the adolescent needs most is gentle understanding and calm patience. To force an adolescent by means of authority to accept any dogma is a crime against his soul. The only way in which an adolescent can develop that which is worth while in his own religious tendencies is to have an en-

vironment of beauty, an environment in which he is taught to see below the visible surface of things into their deeper implications. His natural social sense must be allied to all those human efforts whereby we attempt to develop a higher law than the law of self-preservation. These things, the beauty in the world and its nobler service, may lead him through his storm and stress into maturity.

After all, the secret of the art of life is so to live each stage that its dangers will be obviated, or safely lived through, and its benefits will be carried over into the later stage of experience.

The untiring curiosity of childhood and its spontaneous joy of life should never be outgrown; and in adolescence each individual deserves such understanding training that he will carry into his mature life a sense of the beauty and goodness of the world. That is the natural religion of adolescence, undogmatic, anti-authoritarian, with a love of the beauty of the universe and a sense of its inherent goodness. An adolescent trained with that understanding will pass easily through the surf, where the ebb and flow of contrary forces toss him about, into the haven of calm, rational, mature adult life.