

## SPIRITUAL JOY.

By MISS CARTA STURGE.

In treating of this difficult subject, it is far easier to say how not to present religious ideas to children, than it is to take up the positive side and say how to do it, for this must largely depend upon the individual gifts of the teacher, upon her opinions, upon her personal grasp of what she is talking about, as well as upon the temperament and understanding of the child spoken to; thus general rules are difficult to lay down.

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On the negative side it is easy enough, for it must be obvious now to any thinking person that religion should not be presented in a terrifying manner, in a too incomprehensible way, or so as to give false impressions, or to seem a bore, or something dull and uninteresting; any of which ways of presenting it may have ill effects lasting perhaps through life.

But however obvious it may be now, it clearly has not always been equally obvious that religion should not be presented so as to terrify, for most of us who were born earlier than the sixties can remember a form of religious teaching at the very recollection of which we shudder. The very first idea conveyed to the child's mind of God was too often that of a harsh and cruel judge, who was far more likely to punish you with torments than to receive you into His arms with love; and holiness was conceived of as rather a course to be followed in order to escape a terrible doom, than as something beautiful and attractive in itself leading unto Life. There were of course happy exceptions even in the teaching of parents or teachers who held the most severe opinions, but, as a rule, what the child imbibed was a sense of terror, or, at the least, such a distaste for religion, that he preferred to escape from the thought of it. The fear of Hell has given many a child a morbid turn for life, and still more disastrous on the character was the distorted impression given to the child of God and of all appertaining to holiness. It made many dislike religion altogether and dissociate the thought of God from all that they enjoyed and loved, and thus a tendency to love the world without God in it was the result. I daresay we many of us know the story of the little girl who was afraid of the dark, and begged her mother to leave the candle in the room, and how her mother explained that there was nothing to fear for God was with her, and the little girl's reply "But it is God that I am so afraid of." No doubt few children have expressed this fear so roundly, but many must have felt it.

Then there used also to be a great tendency to teach religion to children in a way that bored them, that failed to interest. This would be fatal in any subject, but most especially in religion, where above all things we want to attract and not repel. I know of a wise lady with a very active little boy, who, being determined that he should not associate being

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bored with his religious lessons, allowed him to move about just as he liked, to climb all about the room doing just what he chose during her talks on this subject. Consequently, he would be frequently standing on his head or turning somersaults during the lesson. It succeeded, for this same antic-cutting boy grew up all his mother could wish and is now a well-known leader in some religious life of London.

But better still would it be to present religion in so interesting a manner that even a very

lively little personage would not want to cut antics at that particular moment, but be ready and willing to give his most intent attention. And this brings me to the heart of the question,—how is this to be done so as to interest children, and attract them to a desire to lead the higher life without mystifying them too much? An authority on this subject wanted to teach his little boy to connect God in his mind with all the beauties of Nature, and, taking him for a walk one day, was delighted to find how keenly the child entered into the beauty and delight of the scene, showing his enjoyment spontaneously and naturally. The father thought this a favourable moment for introducing him to the thought of the Author of the beauty he was so enjoying, wishing him to connect quite naturally and easily the religious idea with the outward aspect of things. But the boy instantly became embarrassed and silent and lost his buoyant enjoyment. The father knew at once that some unwise person had talked to the boy of God and so presented Him as to make Him seem something foreign to the landscape, something outside of and alien from it. This is what happens too often, and God, instead of being associated in the child's thought with all that is beautiful and lovely in the world, the very source of it and of all innocent joy and pleasure, is associated by the child with all that is disagreeable, repressive and painful. How is a child to learn to love and aspire after being in his actions and whole being like such a God?

Thus it seems to me that above all things the first thing to try to do, is to teach a child to associate all it finds most happy and delightful with the idea of God, to point out that he loves his mother and she him just because they are both the handiwork of God who is Love, that the flowers are so beautiful just because they are God's flowers and are revealers to us of the  
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Beauty in God, whom, except in His creation, we cannot see, and to make him realize that God is part and parcel of the world and all its beauty and all its innocent enjoyments, the very joy of which is from Him. In this connection it can be pointed out that we so much associate the idea of gladness with Him, that the old Hebrew poets have taught us to burst out into the most joyous songs in His praise that the world has produced. Thus God will no longer seem to a child something alien and outside, but be intimately connected in his mind with all that he most loves and delights in. How much easier then to instil a desire to act in accordance with His will and to eschew all naughtiness as something that alienates oneself from God. When God is thus regarded as Love and as the genial Giver of all good things, how differently will such a text as "Thou God seest me" appeal to a child. I heard a lady well remark the other day that this text is often so misused with a child. It is generally in connection with their wrong doings that it is exclusively used, thus giving them a fear of the presence of God, associating Him with anger and punishment, almost sometimes with revenge; whereas the child should be taught to feel that nothing could be more beautiful than the thought of the constant presence of One who is Love itself, and that we are for ever in His sight and care. "Thou hast beset me behind and before,"—this should be as wonderful and inspiring a thought to a little child as to the Psalmist—that he is always in the watchful care of His own Maker, dear to Him as the very work of His hands.

It is true, that it is very difficult to convey to a young mind the idea of God as

omnipresent, as being, though the source of all, though the supreme power and force in the Universe, yet invisible, as being more real than the seen, and yet unseen. This idea may be taken very crudely, and with even careful teaching, convey a strangely odd idea to a child, as in my own case when of very tender years. Having it explained to me that God could see me but that I could not see Him, I remarked entirely gravely "Then I suppose when I look up to the sky to look at Him that He hides His head under a cloud." A child is certain to reason the thing out in its own mind in some fashion and this was the very concrete way in

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which I tried to conceive the problem. At a later stage I had the still more unfortunate idea of thinking of God as a great and powerful machine, which proved a disastrous hindrance in the way of my learning to feel any love for Him for a great many years. It is ideas like this that we want, if possible, to prevent by giving some reasonable notion of Spirit. Perhaps the easiest way of doing this is by referring a child to his own thoughts, pointing out that they are real things and the most important part of himself and yet are not visible to himself or to others. Thus by thinking of himself, his thoughts and his feelings and his desires, he can be brought to some conception of mind as being different from his body yet quite as real and as being able to prompt the body to action, yet he will easily apprehend that he can neither see nor touch his mind, not attach any idea of size or shape to it, though its influence pervades the whole body. From this it may not be difficult to introduce the idea of God as pervading the world he sees about him and being its moving spirit. The air is also a somewhat helpful illustration as a very powerful something to be found all about us and yet something not seen. It will be helpful, too, to point out that life can never be seen; we see things that are alive, things that are endowed with some power that can make them grow and expand like the flowers, or move and act like animals, or think like human beings, yet we can never by any means get a glimpse of this power which we call life, and then by pointing out that God is the supreme Life permeating everything, without which nothing could exist, some faint but intelligible idea may take possession of the child's mind.

It may be objected that this is far too erudite a method of talking for a child-mind, and impossibly difficult, but to my knowledge this way of teaching some of the most fundamental truths of religion has been by some parents most successfully carried out, with the very happiest results upon the children.

Fairy Tales may even be made useful and helpful by using them as parables. Some persons object to the reading of fairy tales by their children, because they think they fill their minds with idle fancies and notions that are untrue. I remember myself as a child, whilst enjoying fairy-tales, feeling deeply that they were not true, especially those fanciful, but

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delightful ones which represented that every flower was the dwelling place of a tiny fairy and every stream as the home of a water-sprite. How astonished I should have been if any one had put before me that, if the thing was not literally true as told by the fairy-tale, yet that it was a parable that expressed a still more wonderful and beautiful truth, that every flower and plant and tree is a house of life, that if there is no fairy for us to see when we peep into the flower,

yet it is full of an invisible energy which makes it grow and develop in all its loveliness, which we can, if we like, call a fairy, only a fairy is not nearly wonderful enough a name to call it by if we can think of a better. Only it is so difficult to find any words or ideas good enough for the real wonderful truth, that in all ages people have tried to express these great things by pretty fancies; and especially in early times, people had such a great sense that every thing was alive, that they believed that woods were full of little spirits called nymphs and the streams of sprites and so on. From such a text it would be an easy transition to explain that now we do not feel as if the wonderful life around is like fairies, but that our poets have other ways of telling the same truth, as when one of them tries to make us feel the sacredness of a wood by telling us in beautiful lines that "there is a spirit in the wood," the great and mysterious presence of life. In ways such as this, varying of course according to the gifts of the individual teacher, each of whom will have his or her own way of viewing the incessant miracles wrought by God in Nature, that spirit of reverence and sense of the unfathomable mystery of things may be developed in which the true spirit of worship so largely lies.

And then, if we teach the child to realize a little that all the beautiful things in the world are closely related to his own being, that he and they all share in the one all-pervading life, are part and parcel of each other in God's creation, here will come in naturally his moral duty to animals which share his life, and a reverence for Nature as something not to be wantonly spoilt by the hand of man where it is possible to help it.

Then, as he is shown as simply as can be, the ascending scale in the degrees of life, as it were, or the gradual development

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which the Creation presents to us, the plant higher than the mineral, the animal than the plant, and himself so much higher than the animal, so highly endowed with life that we speak of ourselves as "made in the image of God," he may be led to a sense of his moral responsibility, and to the importance of not marring that divine image by unworthy conduct. And thus he may be brought step by step to understand that, by living a life that is righteous, godly, or god-like, he may ever grow upwards and nearer to God, the source of his life, and find in this ever deepening spiritual joy.

I should like to say one more word concerning spiritual joy in connection with a child's religion. Not only is it important, as I have tried to point out, that a child should learn to associate all his innocent enjoyments, all his natural affections, his love for his mother, his delight in his toys, the pleasure of the fields he plays in, and of the very air he breathes, with the goodness and love of God, as the Giver of it all, but I cannot but feel that there is another important element to be considered in connection with spiritual joy, and that is the removal of the over-much developed fear of death. Many a good Christian's whole life is spoilt by an overpowering dread of death, every joy clouded by the knowledge, that, be our life happy or not, it has to end in what appears to many as a catastrophe, a consummation alien to all that they know of the joy of life. This is because we are apt to regard death, as if it really were death with no outlook beyond. It is strange that Christians, who are taught to believe unquestioningly in immortality, who do not doubt it for a single moment, should yet look upon death as if it were a

finality. It seems to me that we ought to learn to look upon death as a perfectly natural thing in line with all the rest of our existence, and paradoxical as it may sound, as a natural and *healthy* sequence to the rest of things, as a portal to a higher living, as a consummation, not to be hurried on, not to be impatient for, but to be looked forward to with joy, as a natural introduction to a new life, a renewal, and far more than a mere renewal, of powers which fade in old age, in fact as something supremely to be desired in its proper place and time. In the desire to make children good by the fear of an angry God, and of punishment for wickedness, we

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have accustomed people to look upon death with terror, as a something looming over us, the very thought of which is a kill-joy in our very happiest moments.

Now, perhaps, we do not want to call children's attention to the subject of death at all, if we can help it. They are in all the first beautiful flush of life as we know it on this plane. We do not want too much to call their attention to death in this early stage of their being any more than we want prematurely to dwell upon the future event of marriage, or of taking up a profession. All these things have to be brought to the attention in their proper place. But, at least, let us avoid inculcating any fear of death, and if it must be alluded to, let us refer to it as a natural process as much in the care of God as are all the other affairs of life, and as an introduction to a Life far transcending anything we know now. We want to teach a living realisation in thought of the words we all know so well, but perhaps so little take in, some of us, that "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love him." Thus, I believe that by more care in introducing a knowledge of what we call death to the youthful mind, we should remove a serious obstruction to the sense of spiritual joy.

Joy is essentially the product of life, and we need to teach that every process that helps towards the healthy development of life, that every act that duly exercises our physical body, that every mental act by which we gain a new fact of knowledge, a new idea, that every rightly-used function of body, mind and soul, that every event from birth to death is a process of gaining "life, more life," and of learning to know, and hence to love the Source of Life, and so ever to grow in the sense of Spiritual Joy.