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The Pedagogy of Religion: Two Conversations between God and Children

Peter Gelderloos

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It was my grandfather's memorial service, and the Dutch Reform pastor took a break from talking about God and Heaven to the members of the congregation, in which I, as a dutiful grandson, was unfortunately included for the moment, in order to address the children in the audience, the grand-kids and great grand-kids of the deceased, nearly all of them baptized into the Dutch Reform church or a like-minded denomination, as the apple does not fall far from the tree.

"Now, you all might be wondering," began the pastor in a condescending tone, only slightly more exact in diction and enunciation than that with which he had been addressing the adults, "what all this is about. On Friday, when you found out that Grandpa died, your mommy and your daddy told you that Grandpa had gone to Heaven. They told you that he is leaving us for a while, because God called him up to be with Him in Heaven." His surety of this occurrence seemed about as strong as his conviction regarding my

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grandfather's posthumous fate. The one being an empirical fact (mommy and daddy either did or they did not explain the death in this fashion) and the other a supersensory, non-rational statement of faith (Heaven and the soul not being subject to scrutiny or observation), the pastor's narrations were less a conjecture of fact than a reminder of orthodoxy. By trustingly assuming that all parents present used the death as an opportunity to confound young minds into an acceptance of religion, the pastor was also issuing a stern reminder that it was their responsibility to do so, thus talking to the parents as much as he was to the children. The children were not being given the lesson so much as they were the lesson.

"But then when you went to the funeral home on Sunday," he continued, "and saw Grandpa lying there in the coffin, you must have been confused. Didn't mommy and daddy say Grandpa was in Heaven now? Why is he lying here? Well, I'll tell you why. That wasn't Grandpa lying there in the funeral home. It was just his body. You see, the body is just a house for the soul. And when the body dies, that means the soul has gone to heaven. Grandpa is in Heaven now with God, because God called him up, and said: "Hey, it's your time. Come to my side and live with me in Heaven." So Grandpa left his body-house and went to Heaven. But since God made the house, since the house is his creation, and he loves it too, that is why we treat it with respect, dress it up, make it look nice, and put it in a coffin and bury it in the ground. But the soul lives forever, and you and I, we're the souls and our bodies are just a house. The body will die one day, but Christians live forever. When we die, we move out of our body-house to live in the Kingdom of God. It was moving day for Grandpa."

There was a severity underlying the warmth and softness of the pastor's pedantic sermon, as though he were driving home a point that had already been addressed, his words holding the children hostage so as to deliver a message to the rest of us. But I had little more time to think on this theme, as the lady at the piano began cranking out a bunch of dreary hymns about Jesus loving us and

However, the entire congregation cannot arrest itself, politically, at the level of infantile powerlessness (whereas such a retardation at the intellectual level is far more sustainable over time). The priest alone would not be able to maintain such a tyranny without assistance. Though they do not speak for God, propertied males grow in time to become church elders, in conjunction with contemporaneous systems of hierarchy, though they can do this only so far as they speak with one voice, and offer no rebuttal to the word of God, which is solely the domain of the priest (and accordingly the priest can say nothing unexpected, but must repeat moral lessons by polished rote, like the recitation of a multiplication table). This single-mindedness within the moral hierarchy is not nourished by discourse; it is replicated by inculcation, signified by the programmatic education of children. And since this tired repetition of simplistic truisms allows no room for independent affirmation (as this would also open the door for contradiction or disavowal), it can only renew its validity when it is taught to, and embraced by, new members, and only at the level of childish mysticism are these tautological explanations of morality sufficient; thus the immaturity of the adults, when reflected onto the children, can reaffirm their orthodoxy.

The parents renew their faith vicariously through their children, even as they are instilled with the imperative of indoctrinating them to perpetuate the religious hierarchy. (After all, even as they prepare for their real life in Heaven, it is the duty of the God-fearing to multiply, and continue their dominion on earth).

dying for us, and we should love Jesus so we can go live with God in the Kingdom of Heaven, etc. I wondered incredulously that these people sat through such repetitions once or twice a week.

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On another Sunday several months removed, I awoke to more such hymns by accident when my radio-alarm, normally set to news or music, switched on in time for the broadcast of a local Mennonite church's morning service. An entirely different denomination, but hymns with the exact same hackneyed themes about loving Jesus and going to live with God when we die, as though these white, middle-class parishioners faced lives of utmost agony and oppression that they had to hold their breaths for a life after this one before they could have satisfaction, until that time secure in the knowledge that some invisible leprechaun in the awnings loved them and would protect them from all suffering, except for all the suffering they actually did experience, which, well, was just a test.

Afterwards, the preacher-figure in this congregation brought some children up to the stage, or pulpit, or whatever this particular church had at the front, and interrogated them for the sake of some merry lesson.

"What are some things that make you happy?" asked the preacher.

"Playing with friends," "Sunshine," "Birthdays," came the lisped, falsetto responses.

"Oh, Birthdays, yes. And what are some things that make you angry?" asked the preacher expressively, like some novice actor. The timid responses were inaudible. "Now when something makes you happy or angry," continued the preacher, "who can you talk to about this?" The children seemed uncertain: there were no answers. "Who can you talk to? Who loves you and who takes care of you?"

This answer they knew, and the responses came without hesitation: "My friends." "My parents."

“Yes, your parents. Your parents love you more than anyone!” Once again, this was not a certified fact but the expression of an ideal relationship, and the preacher’s confirmation was not extended to the relationship of friend — the difference being, perhaps, that age-group peers cannot provide what parents can: mentoring in the aged hierarchy that comes with religion. “But who else? Do you remember the hymns we just sang? Who else loves you?”

No longer speaking from certain knowledge, instead thinking back to that morning’s melodized lesson, the children responded by rote, with the tone of someone who has performed a newly learned trick and expects a reward (I could almost see their tails wagging): “God!”

“Good! That’s right!” lavished the preacher. “God loves you more than anyone, even more than your parents! And any time you need to, you can talk to God, because God loves you and He wants to know what you’re thinking, He wants to know what is inside your heart. So any time you feel like it, you should talk to God, and tell him what makes you happy, and what makes you angry, even if you’re angry at Him.” Preparing them for disappointment at such a young age. The sermon continued...

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The use of children to explain a moral lesson is worth noting, and I say “use” deliberately. In both instances, children were made the centerpiece of the sermon, and their indoctrination was a sort of play or fable directed at the adults. The children’s role as props is made apparent by the totality with which they are ignored before and after their appearance in the lesson plan. That both conversations were pedagogical is plainly demonstrated by the teacher-figure in each case, the one who lectured no less so than the one who entertained a dialogue, a farce clearly intended to lead the children to offer up the “right” answer.

Religion’s tautological nature offers some explanation for the priest’s use of children to instruct the parents. There are no complex truths in religion to be understood or imparted only by the “mature” mind. Rather, the mind of the believer must be suspended in an “immature” state, in order to accept as profound and unquestionable mysteries the mystifications with which religion dutifully disguises the fully historical moral systems, social relationships and power structures of the status quo. Christianity, for example, is a philosophically simplistic religion (perhaps this is a redundant phrase) and what is required in the believer above all is a childish¹ suspension of disbelief, a never-ending leap of faith even beyond the perennial fantasy of Santa Claus, who at least dispenses some measurable reward in return for the piety he receives. As such, the child, fully trained to admit her ignorance and trust the mythic wisdom of the adult, is the ideal disciple of the church, and the demonstration of the child being taught his lesson is above all a demonstration of the proper behaviour, for all members of the congregation, of a believer before a moral authority figure.

Therefore, the ideal relationship between the constituency and leadership of the church is a fundamentally patriarchal one; that of father and children, or shepherd and sheep, with God as the father and the congregation the children. Not being an active or even present participant, God needs an intermediary: the priest. The priest uses a relationship between himself and the congregation’s children to show what must be reproduced between God (represented by himself) and the entire congregation. They are his flock. Other demonstrations of morally sanctioned power (the recent drama in the Catholic church for one) arise from this hierarchical relationship, as a shepherd will do what he must with his sheep.

¹ Childishness being a socially constructed value and not a trait inherent to children.