

A Confrontation?

The Adolescent and His Religion

The Cult is not a new arrival on the religious scene, but the more recent and renewed interest especially among the young has been termed "a red light on the instrument panel, revealing some deficiency in vital circuits." Not all cults signal disorder, but from their manifestations a certain number may be judged to be a serious threat to the religious development of our youth. Why should young people be attracted? Speaking to "adults who are called upon to be their guides," Francoeur studies the normal patterns of religious development, and describes the part parents and other adults may play by respecting these patterns and so ensuring a healthy maturation process towards adult faith and its lived expression.

One of the dangers of speaking of the adolescent in "confrontation" is to maximize his responsibility for awkward and immature thought and action. This, it would seem, creates a mind-set of adult innocence and adolescent guilt. This paper is not to be a study of relative guilt in the dialectic between an adolescent and the adult forces operating around him; but rather it will be an examination of the outcomes possible in the religious development of our youth in its relation to the sensitivity, wisdom, and obedience to nature of those adults who are called upon to be their guides.

It is too early in our study to define "cult," but we can safely assume that in the broadest sense it would be acceptable to see it essentially as a religious phenomenon. We will need more precision later, but first let us examine the nature of religion, its gradual development in the human race, and the guidance of its development.

Religious anthropology shows that humankind has sensed throughout its history the presence of the divine, of that which we may call God, and has attempted a response ranging from the most primitive — relatively speaking — to the modes of belief, prayer, contemplation, sacrifice, and ritual that we witness

today; and this within lifestyles ranging from primitive groupings, cenobitic and anchoritic, to small closely-knit communities, to the larger and seemingly more adaptable and flexible groupings of today. And within these groups have emerged priests and priestesses, leaders whose power and influence have ranged from that of demi-god to benevolent, approachable, and available pastor and prophet.

Whilst we have been restless in our response, and uneven in our patterns of progress, the deep interest today in Eastern spirituality and contemplation, and the universal North American involvement in the “wholly other,” spoken of by Peter Berger among others in his *A Rumor of Angels*, show us that we still probe, still search, still follow the instinct that is restless to know — eager to live more and more humanly as we “see the point” ever more clearly.

Not solely an adult venture

But this perception and inquiry are not exclusively an adult activity; the adult is not alone in seeking the “peace of restlessness.” From a very early age the child is awed in sensing a divine presence and providence, and embarks on a lifetime of wonder. Maria Montessori is one of our most astute observers and sensitive spokesmen in this matter. It is evident too that here, as in all human developmental sequences, a constant and respectful guidance is called for.

We say “respectful” because feelings are so sensitive among adults concerning the importance of the child’s religious orientations that we are likely to be more demanding here and less accepting of natural developmental rhythms, less understanding of developmental awkwardness, than we would be in other areas of the guidance of human development. We are not shocked to hear Heifetz state, at the height of his career, that at the outset of his afternoon practice sessions, following a brief lunch break, his bowing arm feels awkward; yet we fall prey to anxiety when children and youth show lapses, regressions, or crises in their religious response. Guidance there must be, but if we are to avoid disenchantment, rebellion, the abandoning of search, and other developmental anomalies in children and youth, we must assure ourselves that such guidance respects the child’s innate sense of God and the things of God, as well as his gradual developmental readiness.

We are talking of avoiding violence, because violence it is when a regression in the service of progression, a transitory plateau for the re-organization of thought, or a temporary distaste for or criticism of certain rituals and expressions, is interpreted as negativism, willful transgression, disobedience, or rebellion, and is followed by hard judgment that frequently engenders lasting feelings of disturbing guilt.

Further, in their observing, assessing, and planning, those who guide religious development must be utterly careful to distinguish between, on the one

hand, responses and behaviour in the child rising possibly from a desire to please parents and other guides and authority figures, and on the other hand spontaneous, univocal, unguarded responses and behaviour patterns, rooted in a natural, gradually unfolding power of perception and integration that has moved slowly from its pre-rational mode to the more fully human, that “sees the point.”

Guiding adolescent search

We have thus far offered some preliminary observations of religious response and growth, but in order to understand more fully the reason for choice itself, and eventually a particular pattern of choice of religious expression, there are points within the developmental continuum that need further emphasis.

What we are attempting to observe is the normal pattern of growth in perception, thought, decision, responsibility, wisdom, or *weltanschauung*, and this in the particular area of religious consciousness, giving rise eventually to a particular way of life or an identifiable habitual pattern of behaviour. But this sort of relatively stable adult homeostasis is reached with the passage of time, and at the expense of constant effort and patient acceptance of error and awkwardness along the way. Such gradual growth calls for the interplay and coordination of influences from without and controls from within, with the former gradually withdrawing as the latter develop in insight, originality, and autonomy. This, precisely, is the art of educating in any sphere. Luciano Pavarotti’s teachers freed him from their guidance as his ability and the urgency that he interpret the great masters his way gradually became manifest.

Such development towards a personal insight and artistry in religious expression, just as well as in music or in other arts and professions, will mean ongoing, long-term exploration into the unknown, and will mean questions and experimentation that in the view of some would be termed “risking.” In learning the art of living, this would seem to translate itself into certain periods or episodes of awkwardness if not “hanky panky,” or in the “sowing of wild oats.” No attempt here at judgment or justification, but rather a call to an honest facing up to the fact that in all learning, including the learning of virtue, we in fact move from the less perfect to the more perfect in a pattern of progression, regression, periodic immobility, and fumbling — and all in varying tempos and unpredictable rhythms.

In all teaching we try to identify and care for needs, we avoid the provocation of anxiety and insecurity, we attempt to allow the person to discover at his own pace his individuality, and to express it comfortably, productively, and creatively. We attempt neither to hurry nor to hamper, but rather to offer that guidance that is found acceptable precisely because it is neither judgmental nor distorting of natural developmental patterns.

Toward comfort or insight?

We shall now focus more sharply on the adolescent and his religious development, with a view to tracing its evolution in reaction either to the sensitive guidance of basic needs and thrusts, or to disrespectful distorting and prejudice. This will enable us to observe both the relatively smooth patterns leading to an adult life of mature religious thought and expression, a “middle of the line” outcome where, to a large extent, much imitation and magical thinking remain; and, at the other extreme, the pattern of rebellion, and of seemingly esoteric and irrational expression of some lifestyles and groupings.

Our thesis is that if religious needs, instincts, hungers, and drives are met, fostered, and nurtured, then the young person will develop naturally into the “animal religiosus,” the “animal orans” so well named by the religious anthropologist and social psychologist.

The early sensing of the “Wholly Other” in experiences of awe gives rise gradually to movements of wonder, of probing search, of the desire to celebrate in life and in ritual. Children, born as they are into a family environment, normally find themselves in the context of a certain religious tradition and expression. This may well be a framework necessary to religious growth — a growth, it has been shown, that does not develop in a vacuum. School and Church Community participate here, and the coordination and orchestration of the effort are difficult. This paper does not seek to explore that problem, but we must bear it in mind.

The child’s human rights include liberty of thought, of conscience and of religion, with the implied right to change religion or conviction and the freedom to practise his religion alone or in the community of others, in public or in private, by teaching, practices, or rites. Obviously, an initiation and early guidance are called for, and this in some given context, as we have just seen. Such guidance must, however, respect nature’s designs and endowments as well as the child’s growing need for autonomy.

We seek security, we seek answers, we seek help in our search, we seek patterns of behaviour that we may imitate and evaluate; yet, as we grow in our ability to gain insight and make enlightened choices, we feel the growing need to free ourselves from controls from without. This is not, as might be interpreted, a sign of ingratitude, because indeed no greater mark of honour can be offered those who guide and nurture us than that of our own emerging ability to self-direct — the very seal of our having reached true adulthood which, surely, is their deepest wish for us.

Here, precisely, within this process towards enlightened and free choice, is where the stage is set and the choice made between the first two possible options of religious expression: mature religious commitment, as opposed to a rather

energy-less, pseudo-sophisticated acceptance of quasi-magical thinking and a "morality" barely nibbling the edges of reality-thinking, with reward and punishment determinants rearing their pre-rational heads prominently in the background. One wonders at the number opting or rather settling for this lifestyle when our deepest and most radical nature is in thrust towards ever deeper probing, towards dissatisfaction with now-present-insights, and towards human acts focused on our deeper insight into, and respect for, person. The cause seems to lie mainly in a combination of factors: humankind's laziness as it settles for the "comfortable" though obviously unnatural position, and the lack of energy and of sense of responsibility displayed by parents and other educators as they attempt to stimulate search, to encourage and respect initiative, and rejoice with the young as they discover their sense of religious autonomy.

The remedy seems to be in the force, mainly non-verbal, of the authenticity, depth, and maturity of our own religious conviction and commitment, and in the painstaking, time-absorbing, patient and non-judgmental guidance of the young through the demanding yet exciting steps of their own religious development.

The cult as option: guidance and safeguards

The extreme and too often unfortunate outcome mentioned earlier may now be explored, that of rebellion, and in some cases the turning to the esoteric and seemingly irrational expression of certain groups.

We would want to make it clear here that a sweeping and general judgment of cults or sects is in no way intended. The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought describes the *sect* as a movement breaking away from a Church and maintaining itself in distinction, with strictly voluntary membership, and with more intense religious and social interaction among its members than is found in other organizational forms of religion. Thus far we seem to be in the presence of a relatively rational and mature developmental option.

However, other groups display, in alarmingly growing numbers, threatening, rigid, and humanly intolerable modes of expression and public statement. Such groups are marked by the conviction that they alone are the "pure," the "elected ones," who often feel persecuted and who find in their group salvation from universal corruption. They feel they are right even against world opinion and especially against authority. There is total lack of interest in the masses, in "others"; their structure is monolithic, their judgments rigid. Such groups, lastly, are notable for their acutely emotional character.

In dealing with the eventualities of religious development thus far studied we would probably not speak of confrontation. In the process of growth and clarification, the adolescent or young adult may at times appear awkward and

may very well challenge and seemingly defy. It would seem, however, that only when the young person embraces a cult that might endanger the flowering and mature expression of his own total humanness might we talk of "confrontation"; and this in the sense not of open and explicit warfare or challenging, but rather of ideologies and stances setting themselves up in an opposition before which we cannot remain indifferent.

It is not the aim of this article to discuss possible legal or psychotherapeutic steps that might be taken; rather, we will restrict ourselves to an examination of disturbances in developmental patterns that tend to lead youth to extreme choices.

The cello feels content and peaceful as it celloses forth; the bell feels whole as it rings true. Each has the relatively uncomplicated task of discovering its pitch, its timbre, and then of living these out. Neither could accept a contradiction between nature and expression. Though more complicated for the growing child, the task at hand is much the same. The young person must learn to ring true to nature. We have spoken of freedoms, of rhythms of growth to be respected, of irregular patterns to be accepted, of helping the young to learn from their error and to take up with vigour and confidence, again and again, the work of maturing.

Within this process there are certain areas where our guidance of the young would seem to be most sensitive if we are to preserve their trust. Do we truly encourage and support their search? We speak here of faith: not a faith of blind acceptance but one of assent and ongoing, respectful probing. Do we take their early and native sense of wonder and lead them to sharpen it to the cutting edge of mature, lifelong enquiry? Do we respect their growing sense of being sexual, relational persons, with a sexual identity and its all-pervading effect on their lives? Do we help them to learn of its power to heal, of their growing power to bring life and healing caress through their sexuality? Do we ride easy with their clumsy and, on occasion, seemingly questionable sequences and shapes of behaviour as they learn this art of healing?

Prophecy in its richest sense is a heavy responsibility for all of us, and it is in youth that we learn to accept this responsibility. The young are called to search, to see, to discover new vision and vista, and to share this wisdom with others. This is the essence of prophecy; and it is learned slowly as our prophets in all domains give witness through their hard work, slow growth, pain, and the agony of being at times misunderstood. Do we explore with our young people the patience and energy of an Aristotle, the sufferings of a Jeremiah, the abuse offered a Galileo, the slowly unfolding vision of a Chagall, the inspiration of a Bernstein, the persistence and strength of a Heifetz, the courage and genius of a T.S. Eliot, the quiet conviction of a Gandhi?

Do they learn from us, as living models, the meaning and pain and need of love? Do they see our love for them rising from a recognition of their dignity,

and a reverence for them as persons, growing, even through distortions, into responsible lovers of and carers of their fellow humans?

Will we present to our young the patterns of mature religious belief and expression that promise freedom, inner harmony, and authentic self-expression? Will we appear as respectful, available counsellors, as they search out an autonomous vision and expression? Will we accept from them religious patterns that may, though honest, balanced, and sincere, differ eventually from ours?

If we can meet these demands with serenity, without anxiety, with lived evidence of belief in a divinity who asks nothing of us beyond honest, persistent effort, prompted by an open, growing vision; if we show our youth the deepest respect, non-judgmental love, and offer them an open forum for quiet discussion and objective examination of progress — and indeed, at times, of regression — towards gradually clarifying goals; then that which might have taken the nature of confrontation becomes, rather, the occasion for constructive criticism and the gradual shaping of life's challenge and adventure, in a setting of mutual trust and inter-dependency.

Conclusion

The scope of this paper could not be an exhaustive study of the phenomenon of religious expression nor could it suggest foolproof cures for questionable outcomes of religious development. Both the religious fact and human development are still too little understood for that. Based rather on certain widely accepted premises, and on known patterns of adolescent growth, the discussion has attempted to guide us in our educative influences to lead the young to mature, independent expression, without being forced or tempted into extreme positions of negativism or of doubtfully rational allegiances, in an attempt to find the security of belonging and the state of inner peace they so basically need.



Frank Pittman, '79

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