Religious Education and the Search for Ideals

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THE dedication of any building is a time of joy and some solemnity. When we view this brick, mortar and concrete that we have put together, we have a feeling of permanence and it strengthens us. In any fine new building, with its trim lines and its shining walls yet unspotted, it is hard to think of anything but the best in human behavior going on inside. And when the building is to be devoted to the work of the church, there comes an added feeling of reverance. We are uplifted by the thought that so many willing hands and willing if modest pocketbooks were joined together to make the building real, when the cause had no possible return in anything but the service of love.

Because buildings such as this are hard to come by and dedications are infrequent, we try to think about the larger setting. This is a building dedicated to religious education. What does that mean? Unlike other education buildings it won't be supported by taxes or tuitions; it won't give credits or degrees; it won't teach anybody how to make a living. Because religious education is none of these things, some people may be inclined to think of it as a sort of fringe business: A Sunday thing; a nice place to leave the youngsters. See, they have baby-sitters, and such fine new plumbing! Others may be inclined to think of religious education as a stiff shot of ethical conduct injected once a week by the minister and his staff: a sort of out-patient moral clinic. To others still, and this I trust means others not in this church, or perhaps any church, religious education means nothing at all. Education they think they understand; religious education is a puzzle and a blank.

As one whose livelihood is involved in education without any preceding adjective, I have approached religious education perhaps through reason rather than revelation. My opening thought is a bad one; I find it impossible to shake. It is the thought that our generation is running out of ideals. I don't mean the old saw that young people are going to the dogs; I think they are better morally and more serious than my generation was. But what about long-range hopes and goals; reform movements, social invention; international peace programs? I don't see these among the young or old as we used to see them. Perhaps it is still post-war disillusionment; but next year it will be 15 years since V-J Day and that ought to be long enough to emerge from the shadow of post-war. Of course, there was Korea and there is the cold war. But no matter how we explain it, we see many signs that our inventory of ideals is running low. I see this more in the middle-aged than in young people; because middle-age is where ideals should start to operate. We love our country, but government is clumsy and a burden. We love our neighbors, but they are ambitious and noisy; they run their power-mower at 7:00 o'clock on Sunday mornings. We love service to others, but there is little time for it after we have finished serving ourselves in this inflated economy. Our children love us and want to be helpful in a general way, but they are busy with

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an amazing number of activities: "Sure, I'll sweep out the garage. Can I have a dollar an hour, like Henry gets across the street?" We love our community: "But if the city lets those cheap little houses go up in the next block we're going to sue the Council for dragging down our real estate values." We love everybody: but there isn't time to do much about it these days.

It is dreary and trite to say we have come to a materialistic world. Did the materialism drive out the ideals, or did the ideals fade and then the materialism came in as to a vacuum? In either case we are threatened with suffocation by creature comforts and no one seems to know how to get out from under them.

It is also dreary and trite to say we live in an anxious time and are afraid of the future: afraid of the H-bomb; afraid of nuclear fallout and Strontium 90; afraid of a population growing too fast for the world to have room a few years from now. The other day I heard an illustrated talk by a high-ranking officer on the subject of the Navy's Polaris Missile, a neat little package that comes out of the sea from an atomic submarine anywhere and aims for its target—which is frankly identified as Russian—1,500 miles away. The officer assured us that the Navy could save America, because the submarine could not be located as a retaliatory target, and therefore Russia couldn't shoot back. We had the hint of an idea that Russia would consider it not cricket to hit our cities when we were shooting at her cities from our submarines. This order of logic is not un-typical of the desperateness of our underlying lack of hope in the gospel of force against force as a long-range path to peace. As Admiral Mahan once said, "The only argument for force is that it buys time for moral ideas to take root."

It would be overstating my pessimism to say our present generation is without hope. I simply say I haven't discovered what our hopes are and this is especially true of the young. The other day a pacifist speaker gave a talk at our college assembly: the old doctrine that we should lay down our arms unilaterally and turn the other cheek in faith that our adversaries will be softened to lay down their own arms. We used to have pacifists in the early 30's, and there was much excitement about them. The student reviewer this week was fair and objective in his newspaper report. Only his conclusion let me down: "The ideas of Mr. Swomley are indeed noble, and I'm sure we are all against war and we all love peace. But it is unlikely that the immediate plans which he proposes would work out in the modern world." The baffled man of middle age who used to argue these questions hotly on campus 25 years ago is left blank by the student report of '59: what then does this student think we **ought** to do? What are **his** alternatives? How does he define **his** hopes for the future?

Somewhere we need to find the handle to a set of ideals which can carry us through the 60's in better shape than we went through the 50's. And there is not much evidence that our schools and colleges by themselves can supply us that handle.

Some people say the reason schools and colleges do not supply young people with ideals is that they are public instead of tied in with the church as schools used to be. There is not much point in that argument today; neither the church nor any other special agency could take on the task of educating the forty-two millions we have in school in this country. The Arkansas and Virginia efforts to do the job by private means have been miserable failures. Even if it were possible for this to happen it might be a far greater threat to man's freedom than public education is a threat to man's ideals. There would be little education for the poor under a purely private system. Some schools and colleges, to be sure,

are church-related and excellent. They are useful in that at their best they help hold high standards for all education, public and private. But no modern nation can turn its education back to the church. Six hundred years of Western history have shown us that there must always be a separation between mass religion and mass education, just as there should be separation, we in America believe, between central federal government and mass public education.

But to say that religion as an institution can't take over American education is not to say that there should be no religious education at all; religious education supplied in the American way by independent churches to their own congregations. Indeed, as we look at this problem of rediscovering group-ideals, the independent program of religious education looms more and more as a hope still a-light in our society. There are several things hopeful about it.

In the first place it doesn't try to re-do or un-do the basic job of general education. That must be done by the public schools and the colleges. The church program has its special contributions and accents to general education; but it doesn't aim to do the other's job.

In the second place it aims at adding in its own time and place, at least a beginning of biblical literacy; and the knowledge of the Bible is perhaps one of the great losses in today's separation of the school from the church. Even without commitment, the Bible is a basic tool to understanding our Western culture. We are dangerously illiterate of the Bible today.

In the third place, the independent church's religious education program is important because it is family education. We have departed a long way from the family closeness of Bobbie Burns' "Cotter's Saturday Night." If the family stays together at home Saturday night these days it is because both cars are out of commission, and even then it lasts only until 8:30 with the conclusion of "Gunsmoke." Religious education in the family church exposes all of us in the family, more or less at one time, to lessons we should be talking over together around the dinner table. Most of us need the start that a religious education class can give to one or more members of the family.

Fourth, the religious education program casts the minister in his most ancient role. The word Rabbi, as we know, means teacher; and when Jesus brought us a new faith he came, as the gospels say over and over, teaching. The modern-day minister is cast by his many responsibilities into various lesser roles: administrator, financial specialist, money-raiser, ex-officio multiple committee head, civic representative on dozens of causes, youth leader, caller, taxi-driver, and head janitor. Religious education reminds us that the job he should fulfill ahead of all others—aided, to be sure, by his professional associates in religious education—is the job of teaching his congregation. The first and great means is the sermon; but from the sermon flows a stream of lessons to engage us in classes for young and old. We can be glad for the symbolism that our minister's office is in the Religious Education Building.

Fifth, and last for this talk, although it surely isn't last, religious education in our individual churches can help us search for ideals in a setting that may have lasting influence on our young ones growing up. It might even influence the elders for the better; but youth is our hope, since only youth by growing can lead to a growing ethic in future society.

Once again, religious education cannot do the whole job for youth: the Bible is a shield and a staff but it cannot be a complete set of tools for our intricate civilization. As C. P. Snow the British author says in his recent essay, "The Two Cultures," both

America and England are Behind Russia in that Russia has most fully grasped the meaning of the scientific revolution, and Russia is teaching all her youth, willy-nilly, what modern science is. This is the job for our schools and colleges, and it must be speeded up. Where Soviet Russia with all her swift moves is behind is in her dependence upon a shallow, material base for human ethics as it was laid down by two un-loving 19th Century Germans, Hegel and Marx. So shall we be behind unless we make greater use, in our education, of the ethics Christ laid down for us. I have indicated why this can't be done in America's mass program of public education. But in our own small church groups, meeting to learn and to inspire as well as to pray, the rededication to Christian ethics perhaps can be accomplished. It is a job, of course, never finished.

Sectarian quibbles in this should have no part. What we need surely is not to argue ourselves into a state of superiority over the Methodists, the Baptists, the Unitarians, or over the Catholics and the Jews. There is enough common ground in human ethics and ideals among the Catholic, the Jew, and all the Protestant sects so that, by each working among its flock, the general level of American ideals in time may be raised. The key, I think, is to use the family and the church working together, and to start with the very young and keep going.

I can think of no other place at present where this job can be done. Our secular agencies, the schools, the Courts, the social welfare councils, the fraternal orders, and the men's service luncheon clubs, are all too much caught up in the materials of civilization to stand apart and think and to say, "Quo Vadis? Where are we all going, anyway? Who has taught us the best way?" The churches, too, tend to catch themselves up in materials: the magic of growing numbers, more stained glass windows, growing budgets, growing everything, except growing reflection of what it is all for. Yet they need not do this, if they will watch themselves.

Our times need desperately to rediscover what it is all for. Somehow, deliberately, we must seek pathways toward this rediscovery. As you take your child's hand and lead him on Sunday morning into our modest but fine new building for religious education, you may not think it a very meaningful act. But I propose a dedicatory hope: that it may mean a vital first step toward the rediscovery of American ideals, and a human future worth striving for.