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O. BARBARA PRIESTMAN
Ibstock Place School
Clarence Lane
London, S.W.15

April 17th 1949

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A FROEBEL SCHOOL

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IN October 1948 I talked to the parents here about the religious education in this school. Some of those present, and some who could not attend the meeting, asked that it should be duplicated and sent round. Now after a delay, for which I sincerely apologise I send it—not without misgiving, but in the hope that even as it is it may give some idea of the sort of influence which is being brought to bear on your children in this respect. Probably no two of us think exactly the same on this most personal of all subjects and therefore in an effort to avoid conflict in the minds of our children it is most important that we should know something of the sort of teaching being given at home and at school.

Our Founders and Benefactors

The religious ideals of the school depend to some extent on the way in which it has been formed and has grown through fifty years, and I want to take a moment to describe to you its peculiarities because I think they will help you to understand us.

The school was founded along with the Training College in 1894 by a group of people of whom the most influential were Jews. One of them was Dr Claude Montefiore the leader of Liberal Jewish thought, and one of the really great saints and scholars of our time. Miss Lawrence who was first head mistress here, and then for thirty years Principal of the Training College, was a Jewess by birth. It would be difficult to give a specific name to her religion; to be with her was to see the meaning of charity in its widest and deepest sense, she had strength of will and wisdom, joined with amazing humility and was very sensitive to beauty: but I think no one has ever summed her up better than an under housemaid who said after being at the College for half a term, 'She behaves as if every one matters'. It is good for students to grow up with people like that—mature, good people—because, when they become teachers, they realise what potentiality for good there may be in the children they educate. Although those two great personalities were Jewish by birth, it was not the intention of the Governors to found a Jewish institution. The large majority of the staff have always been Christian and we consider ourselves a Christian school.

Our Patroness was the Empress Frederick of Germany, Queen Victoria's daughter. The first principal of the College, Madame Michaelis, was German by birth and of course she was teaching the

educational principles of a German—Froebel. So you will see that, by tradition, we shall have a very broad religious basis and an international feeling. We have had children from many parts of the world. I was in America in 1931 and again and again I met people who knew this school, who had visited it or knew children who had been here. We have had Mahomedans and Hindus with us as well as Japanese children...

Religion at home and in school

The question is what must such a school do about religious training. One parent said to me, 'Leave it right out of school. Leave it to the parents. It is a home affair'. Yes, religion is a home affair. Nowhere else can a child be so well instructed in the dogma of his own church, but even so religion cannot really be left out of school life, because it is a way of life—a philosophy of life—and since school is a preparation for life we, here, must play some part in fostering religious growth or in warping it. We are bound to do one or the other. When children are young they are in many ways less differentiated from each other; they have more in common and it seems to me that in matters of religion the things they most need to learn are the universal things—the broad basis of all religions. It is the God of Love, the God who is, to most of us, represented as a Loving Heavenly Father that most children need first—not the God of Suffering (that understanding comes later). It is the God we worship in happiness and wonder Who is real to them long before the problem of the origin of evil comes upon them. When children first begin to do written work in connection with their Bible lessons one spelling fault occurs with unusual regularity. They spell God G O O D. Is this chance or is it a curious instinct for Truth?

I am going to divide the subject and treat of it under two heads: first, how religious training is part of the ordinary life of the school and, second, how in Morning Assembly and in Sunday Service for the Boarders and in Weekly Bible lessons we seek to develop the religious spirit.

Religious training in the life of the school

Love, courage, reverence. These surely are the three qualities which we must seek to develop in our children if we would bring them to a full rich life. As we teach that 'God is Love' let us be sure that we teach also by example what love is. (That sounds a presumptuous thing to say for often one is an example of anything but love. All the same, I feel sure that children are quick to sense when a grown up is impatient or bad tempered not for malice but by mistake and they are—unless

they are frightened—very apt to accept us as we try to be in spite of our lapses.)

Love means to a child being wanted; love means being forgiven; it means being understood when things have gone astray. Love means a power which cares whether you do right or wrong, and which will support you in your struggle against what you know to be bad in yourself. Love may be stern and make demands, but it never despairs of your goodness. Love, for a young child, is nearly always personified first in parents and secondly perhaps in teachers.

'Perfect Love casteth out fear.' There is, of course, a healthy, natural sort of fear like the fear of being burnt if you put your hand in the fire, but that should have a different name from the fear which is, or has been, in nearly all of us—the fear of the evil in ourselves—and this, if not checked by the healing influence of love, grows to a feeling that evil is stronger than good: that grown ups, as well as God, hate you and are glad if you suffer. The child who is loved, and knows it, is secure and gradually learns the joy of giving love to others as well as to his parents. 'I will help you', 'Will you play with me?', 'Let's do this together': such sayings are the healthy outcome of life in a good infants' class, just as teasing and bullying are sure signs of unhappiness and insecurity in the child who is causing pain. Love seeks also to recognise goodness in all places. I think it is part of a child's training to realise all the service which goes to make his life comfortable. He should learn to enter imaginatively into the work that people do for him. The boarders have more chance than the day children to realise that their meals are the results of hard work and thought on the part of the cooks. They know the housekeeper Miss Stainsby as the provider of everything from chocolate biscuits to a cloth to mop the floor. I am sure that they would grow very one sided unless they had some dim realisation of all the work that goes on to make them comfortable. One small boy we had with us at Little Gaddesden used to make a point of going into the kitchen whenever he had specially enjoyed his pudding to say 'thank you' to Miss Edwards. Do the children at home have their eyes open too?

If only we all realised the harm and waste caused by introducing competition into lessons surely there would be an end to:—'See if you can't beat Fred at sums this week. He's younger than you, you know.' A child learns far more through co-operation than competition. Competition means every man for himself. It brings suspicion and the dangers of conceit or despair. Parents often think that the opposite of competition is inertia. It is a pity they cannot compare the busy hum and concentration in a room where children help each other with the

soulless quiet of the room where each book is shaded by an anxious hand lest a neighbour shall cheat and so steal a mark. 'Love the brotherhood' is a lesson which, to be learnt thoroughly, should be taught in early school days.

When children know through experience something of what love means (and they should begin to know this very early) then they are ready for Bible or other stories about this, the greatest of all virtues.

Courage is a quality much admired in the junior school. At first the admiration is for physical strength and prowess, or even for mere size, but by the age of ten children have progressed to the stage when they admire—even if they do not copy—moral courage. The child who dares to stick up for an unpopular playmate, who is controlled enough not to join in the saying of unkind things, and who dares to tell the truth, is the child who is always most popular of all. Courage demands an example—some sort of hero or leader. No story of heroic leadership has such power to stir the imagination as the story of Jesus' life on earth and it can mean a great deal to a child of nine or ten. Many other tales are told in school—tales of courage, of temptation withstood, of heroism and kindness and, gradually, as a child's sense of security is built up, there grows up a desire to emulate the good and the brave.

Reverence is a quality which should abound in any school. There should be reverence in the teacher for her work and for the material with which she works. There is the reverence and joyous wonder of a child who suddenly sees the meaning of some piece of knowledge—who realises the meaning of 2×2 . The child who watches his caterpillar turn into a chrysalis and then into a butterfly is filled with joy in his own discovery of this marvel. To find out and to explore is an endless delight to children and the greater part of primary school life should be an exploration of life by teacher and children together searching for what is true. This sort of lesson may be called Nature Study, Geography or Mathematics but if it is an honest search for truth it is a vital part of religious education. To set a child to learn facts from books is rarely a part of religious experience because the feeling of awe in the discovery is gone. There is also the reverence caused by great beauty of sight or sound or of thought. It is this sort of search and discovery which leads to the cry 'O Lord how manifold are Thy works; in wisdom hast Thou made them all'.

Perhaps I seem to have spent rather long on this subject of religion in our everyday life but I am more and more convinced that practice comes both before and after precept. 'This people honoureth me with their lips but their heart is far from me' is so often true of adults; it should never be true of young children who tend to think in action.

More specific religious education—I. Morning Assembly

Those of us who are at Istock Place meet daily here in the hall at 9.15. Miss Bowtell keeps us supplied with flowers so that we always have something beautiful to look at. We sing a hymn (we use *Hymns for Junior Schools* and our own private collection of hymns). Then I read to the children or talk to them on some subject which seems important. We have readings from the psalms and prophets, parables, sayings of Jesus and stories from the Old and New Testaments, nature poems or poems about people, extracts from good books—something which may help us to see a little more clearly into the meaning of life. Then we stand to say a prayer: sometimes it is one we all know and we say it together, sometimes I read it and the children listen. Then we sing what is really a sung prayer. It is the same all through one week and is short so that children who cannot read easily can sing it because they know it by heart. Examples of this are:—'God be in my head', 'Day by day dear Lord', 'He prayeth best who loveth best'. Both before and after assembly Miss Beresford Peirse or Miss Charles play to us and I think this has a very important part in bringing us to a reflective and peaceful frame of mind.

Parents are always very welcome to stay to Assembly if they do not mind a very full hall.

II. Bible Lessons

Each class has one Bible lesson, and some have two, in a week. In the *Lower Kindergarten*, 'Bible lesson' is a courtesy title at first. When one is five so much of the background of Bible stories is so foreign and outside anything one can imagine, that the teaching of the Bible can be better seen in stories of children of today or in legends and fairy tales. As the year goes on, however, I find that parables like the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the two houses, do mean something as stories, and they are very useful in helping to give a background for life in Palestine, because one can illustrate them with pictures and begin to talk about what is in the picture that seems unusual to us.

In the *Upper Kindergarten* I tell the children something of what the home life of Jesus was like. About the beds people slept on, the work done in the carpenter's shop, going to the well, grinding the corn and making the bread—all the little details which will make Bible stories more vivid to them later on. I tell them, too, some of the Old Testament stories of other children: of Jacob the boy who had to run away from home and thought he had left God behind, and of the dream he had which taught him that God was with him wherever he went; the

story of Joseph and how he forgave. The children, at this age, have, as a rule, very little sense of time and I have been asked "Were you alive with Mary and Joseph?" so that I never feel it is any use to labour the idea of a time sequence but I do try to find stories which may give them some idea of God or of goodness shown in people.

In the *Transition* I begin with the story of Abraham. We talk a little of how Sir Leonard Woolley found the ruins of Ur buried under the desert sand, because I want them to understand that this is history, and though the stories are very old they are more than fairy tales. Through this year we have stories about the Hebrew people from the time of Abraham to Joshua. There is a black and white sense of right and wrong which children of seven appreciate. The training of the Israelites to keep laws appeals to them who are being subjected to something of the same sort of discipline. The story of the manna and how people who broke the rules punished themselves always delights them. Less easy for them—but very necessary—is God's answer to Moses' prayer. God did answer Moses' prayer that the Israelites might be delivered from bondage but He used Moses to be His instrument and that had not been Moses' idea at all. I think all stories are valuable which show children that prayer is more than asking, and that it will make demands on us if we pray truly.

A little book called *Line upon Line* assured me in my early youth that God and Joshua alike thought the extermination of the Canaanites a good thing, but children today seem able to appreciate that what Joshua thought and what God really wanted may have been very different. For the most part children accept these as stories but sometimes they ask 'Is it true?' and then we stop and remind ourselves of how old they are and how they grew before they were written down and we try to think what might be fact and what might be addition. But, apart from this, any story which is worth the telling has some innate truth of meaning in it, and that is what I feel really matters at this stage.

In *Form I* we have stories of Ruth and stories of Samuel, Saul and David: tales of turbulent times which seem to fit with the children's own rather stormy stage of development. David, the hero, had many of their own failings as well as their good qualities.

In *Form II*, when the average age of the form is nine years, I break off the thread of Old Testament story and tell the story of Jesus because, at this age, it seems to me they are ready for a Hero greater than they can fully understand. At this age the courage and loving kindness of Jesus strike them as they could not do earlier. I use, as a basis for my telling, the Bible, of course, and Basil Matthew's *Life of Jesus*. It seems

to me that what children need most of all at this age is an idea of how the spirit of God shone through the life of Jesus to make it a pattern for us; how He rejected the idea of magic and used the power of love to heal and to draw men to Him. How His strength lay in communion with God and how He would not turn from loving men even though they slew Him; and how, out of what seemed the greatest of all tragedies, came the miracle of the inspiration of the little band of His friends. It seems to me that at the age of nine it is these things that we should learn through the hearing or reading of the stories and that the immaculate conception, the meaning of the passion and atonement are not questions which arise at all.

Many other questions do arise—very deep and difficult ones, but when one cannot give a certain answer, and can only say some think this, and some that, then something valuable happens. In the discussion of what they think, what I think, and what scholars think, real education surely lies. I want them to feel, at the end of this year's work, that the life of Jesus is a life which we can, today, most humbly use as a touchstone for judging our own behaviour, not a life wrapt so far away in pictures of haloes and angels that it is quite remote from us. I want them to begin to realise that the spirit of which men were first aware at Whitsuntide is still here as the Inner Light in each one of us. That God still speaks to us in our hearts.

There is, however, a danger in keying one's teaching too high—the sort of danger that one sometimes hears of in a revivalist meeting. It can be very inspiring to the teacher but if she is not careful a very harmful reaction may set in later.

In *Form III* we go back and study again some of the Old Testament stories. Now it is far less a case of me telling the story—the children study for themselves in the Bible text and we have more chance for thinking of what the real meaning of the story is. Until I began to teach the Old Testament seriously I was lamentably ignorant of its wonderful hero tales and the beautiful characterisation and above all of its depth of religious teaching: and I owe such understanding as I have largely to Dr C. G. Montefiore's *Bible for Home Reading*.

In the *Lower IV*, this year, the children are studying with Miss Duncan the Gospel according to St Mark—the most vivid and probably the oldest of all the Gospels.

In the *Upper IV* they are studying stories of St Paul and of the friends of Jesus. Sometimes we carry the story on and with the lives of some of the Saints, like Patrick and Francis, so that children shall not have the impression that religion stopped being made with the ending of the Bible.

III. Sunday Service [to which Parents and Day Children are always welcome]

On Sunday mornings we have our own service here at school from 10.30 to 11.0 a.m. One out of the three top forms gathers in my room, with Miss Duncan or me, on Saturday morning for what is called Service Preparation. There is a collection of about fifty books they can use. First, we choose a subject:—sometimes the children suggest one or two or more straight away; sometimes we sit and think for a while before any idea comes. Subjects they have chosen lately are Autumn, Birds, Animals (they are very fond of nature subjects), Thinking of Others, Parents and Families, Saints, Brave Deeds, and so on. As soon as the subject is decided there is a rush to get hold of favourite books: (some are considered more fruitful than others). One or two children find a book and may become engrossed in it and that seems, in itself, not to be a bad thing since there are many active children. Some go to work thoughtfully, others want to read any poem or passage with even a *word* of connection with the main subject, or some choose poems which are really too difficult for them to understand. But a little reading aloud and discussion soon settles which readings are best. This time is a great help to me because I see what the children remember and what the readings that they have heard have meant to them. After we have settled the readings, children are appointed to read them and then we choose the hymns. There is usually great competition to read. A few children are shy about offering but they very rarely refuse if asked and usually seem pleased afterwards. We have to practise the reading aloud because our hall echoes and a child's normal pace of reading is too fast and not distinct enough. The practice is held before the service on Sunday.

I do not know whether this sketchy account has given you any real idea of our method of approach. I know it has not touched more than the fringe of the practical difficulties of the subject.

Integrity in religious teaching

Although I think one must be, in the main, very simple and natural and, I would almost say, matter of fact in talking of religion with children, they do at times almost take one's breath away by the things they say. Things that show a deep intuitive sort of wisdom. A boy who was with us at the beginning of the war said to his mother one night as she put him to bed (he was six or seven at the time), "Mother, do you know what I think God is? I think he must be all the good thoughts people have ever had." Although we shall try not to force

any child into thoughts about God which he is too young to think sincerely, it is also my great desire never to give him ideas which he will later have to throw over as false. I doubt whether anyone can wholly achieve this since our knowledge is so limited, but one can honestly try.

Perhaps, in the matter of praying, sincerity shows most of all. It is so terribly easy and so damaging to be sentimental over a little child's prayers. The whole question of praying to God *for* things is fraught with difficulty. If a child once gets the idea of an all-powerful and beneficent God, to ask for things in prayer seems a fine and natural way of getting all he wants. Disappointment and disillusion are bound to lie that way. To pray for fine weather for a special occasion in this country, is a fairly sure way to make difficulties in a child's faith in God's goodness. Even a young child can see that the sort of weather *we* want may affect someone else adversely and God does not, surely, interfere with natural law because we want a picnic. Surely we should learn to pray to God *about* things and about our attitude to things — that we may learn to make the best of the weather. We may bring to Him our rejoicing in warm sunny weather, we ask Him to help us to remember on rainy days those who need it; we thank Him for goodness and kindness around us and gradually we learn to ask that we may be made more fit to serve Him. But this sort of prayer comes, I should say, later—judging by what I have gathered from children preparing service, the younger children tend to want to praise and thank God for things that make them happy. It is usually the twelve year olds who seem to think of God as One who will really help them in their search for goodness.

The mystery of religion is so great that, relatively, we are fellow seekers with the children. Many of their questions we cannot answer—we can only say humbly and honestly what we think; what we have read or experienced. I do not believe we shall ever help their faith by sounding sure about something of which we are not certain, but I think that if these things really deeply matter to us it may be a help to children to know that we, too, are searching for the truth. It is not so frightening to them, when they have an uncertainty, if they know that their mothers and fathers live serenely, also not certain of the way in which things may work out, and that the religious life is not static but a continual exploration and adventure—an hypotheses, if you like, constantly tested by the way in which it reacts on our daily life. For until our religion and our children's religion is really related to our daily life it is worse than nothing. Beautiful ideas adopted from books

or from other people decay and poison us unless they take root in action and become a living part of ourselves.

Our aim for the children is above all things to let them become whole people, not with a religion for Sundays and prayer times only, and a special holy voice, but to have a sense of God within each one which will be a touchstone for all actions—a heightening of all joys and will lead step by step to the recognition that since we are all the children of God, everyone we meet 'matters'.

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