The Religious Aim of Education

by G.K. CHESTERTON

It is only by a definite and even deliberate narrowing of the mind that we can keep religion out of education. I do not deny that it may in certain cases be the least of many evils; that it may be a sort of loyalty to a political compromise; that it is certainly better than a political injustice. But secular education is a limitation, if it be only a self-limitation. The natural thing is to say what you think about nature; and especially, so to speak, about the nature of nature. The first and most obvious thing that a person is interested in is what sort of world he is living in; and why he is living in it. If you do not know, of course, you will not be able to say; but the mere fact of not being able to answer the question that the other person is most likely to ask, may or may not be what some people call education, but it is not a very brilliant exhibition of instruction. If you have convictions upon these cosmic and fundamental things, whether negative or positive, you are an instructor who is on one most important point refusing to instruct. Your motive may be generous, or it may be merely timid; but certainly it is not in itself educational.

It is sometimes said that the devotees of a doctrinal religion, who are so often depicted as donkeys, are in matters of this kind wearing blinkers. The word is not wisely chosen by the critics; and in one sense is much more applicable to the critic himself. The man who teaches authoritative answers to ultimate questions, even if he only says that Mumbo Jumbo made the world out of a pumpkin, may be dogmatizing or persecuting or tyrannically laying down the law about everything, but he is not blinking anything. He is not wearing blinkers, which implies deliberately limiting the field of his own vision. His vision may be in our view an illusion; but if it is very vivid to him, we cannot blame him for describing it; and anyhow he is describing the whole of it. If there is such a thing in the world as a donkey deliberately wearing blinkers, it is the enlightened educationist who is always making a nervous effort to keep out of his task of imparting knowledge any reference to the things that men from the beginning of the world have most wanted to know. Nor are those things mere hole-and-corner objects of a special curiosity. Whether or no they can ever be known, they are not only worth knowing, but they are the simplest and most elementary sort of knowledge. It is a good thing that children should fully realize that there is an objective world outside them, as solid as the lamp-post out in the street. But even when we make the lamp-post quite objective, it is not unnatural to ask what is its object. A naturalist, noting the common objects of the street, may observe many facts and put them down in a note-book. A bicyclist may bump into a lamp-post; a tramp may lean against a lamp-post; a drunkard may embrace a lamp-post or even in a lighter

moment try to climb a lamp-post. But it is not a strange or specialist sort of knowledge to note about a lamp-post that it has a lamp.

Now secular education really means that everybody shall make a point of looking down at the pavement, lest by some fatal chance somebody should look up at the lamp. The lamp of faith that did in fact illuminate the street for the mass of mankind in most ages of history, was not only a wandering fire seen floating in the air by visionaries; it was also for most people the explanation of the post. If a low cloud like a London fog must indeed cover that flame, then it is an objective fact that the object will remain chiefly as an object to be bumped into. I am not blaming anybody who can only manage to regard the world in that highly objective light. Even if the lamp-post appears as a post without a lamp, and therefore a post without a purpose, it may be possible to take different views of it. The stoic, like the tramp, may lean on it; the optimist, like the drunkard, may embrace it; the progressive may attempt to climb it, and so on. So it is with those who merely bump into a headless world as into a lampless post; to whom the world is a large objective obstacle. I only say that there is a difference, and not a small or secondary difference, between those who know and those who do not know what the post is for.

The deepest of all desires for knowledge is the desire to know what the world is for and what we are for. Those who believe they can answer that question must at least be allowed to answer it as the first question and not as the last. A man who cannot answer it has a right to refuse to answer it; though perhaps he is rather too prone to comfort himself with the very dogmatic dogma that nobody else can answer it if he can't. But no man has a right to answer it, or even to arrange for it being answered, as if it were a sort of peculiar and pedantic additional question, which only a peculiar and pedantic sort of pupil would be likely to ask. Secular education is more sensible than making religion one of the extras; like learning fret-work or Portuguese. And this principle is important in the controversy about religious education, because it involves the whole question which was so prominent in the controversy, the question of what is called 'atmosphere'. All that it means is, that anybody who has a right to answer this question has a right to answer it as if it were the sort of question that it is; a question affecting the nature of the whole world and the purpose of every part of human life. If a man is to teach religion, it is absurd to ask him to teach it as if it were something else, that did not apply to all the activities of man. The expression 'a religious hour' is something very like a contradiction in terms. And it is amusing to note that the same casual sceptic who is always sneering at the orthodox for their forms and limitations, who is always talking of their Sunday religion and their separation of things sacred and profane, is generally the very man who is most ready to make fun of the idea of a religious atmosphere in the schools. That is to say he of all people objects most to sacred and profane things being united and to a religion that works on week-days as well as on Sundays. The truth is that the idea of atmosphere is simply a piece of the elementary psychology of children. In any other matter, these

people would be the first to tell us that education must take note of all the influences forming the mind, however apparently light or accidental. They will go wild with dismay if the child has to look at the wrong wall-paper; they will set themselves seriously to see that he has the right picture of the wombat; but they tell us not to trouble whether he has the right picture of the world.

I am not implying, of course, that there is no value in a secular social enthusiasm; or even that, in the language that some use sincerely and even usefully, it may not deserve to be called religion. What I doubt is whether it can in this sense deserve to be called reason. It does not satisfy the primary intellectual hunger about the meaning of life, that certain people may mean well, even when they doubt whether it means anything. The truth is that there is implied in almost all idealism a number of ideas which the idealists have seldom really followed out as ideas. There is the notion of a choice that is mysteriously offered and followed by equally mysterious consequences; of a mystical value attached to one part of our nature without any authority to value it; of a sort of ultimate tryst with nobody in particular; in short all the rich tints of a London fog surrounding a lamp-post without a lamp. I am very far from lacking in respect for all this groping idealism; I only say, that by its own confession, it is very incomplete compared with that of anybody who has a complete philosophy, because he has a creed. And I mean no offence when I say that anybody who has this sort of education is literally a half-educated person.

But there is another aspect of the case, which illustrates the real truth in the rather rustic Puritanism of the people who made a fuss about Darwinism in Dayton. To some of us it seems strange that such very antiquated Protestantism should be supposed to represent religion. It seems stranger that such very antiquated Darwinism should be supposed to represent science. But as a matter of fact the protest and prosecution on that occasion did represent something. It stood for a strong popular instinct, not without justification, that science is being made to mean more than science ever really says. An evolutionary education is something very different from an education about evolution. Just as a religious school openly and avowedly gives a religious atmosphere, as a scientific class does sometimes covertly or unconsciously give a materialistic atmosphere. A secularist teacher has just as much difficulty as a priest would have, in not giving his own answer to the questions that are most worth answering. He also is a little annoyed at not being allowed to put the first things first. He tends more and more to turn his science into a philosophy. It makes the matter too disputable and provocative perhaps to call that philosophy materialistic. It is more polite and equally pointed to call it monistic. But the point is that this philosophy has in it something altogether alien, not only to all religions that refer back to the will of God, but even to all moralities that revolve upon the will of man. Rightly or wrongly, its image of the universe is not that of a post put up with the design of having a lamp on it; it is rather that of a post that grew like a tree; a lamp-post that eventually grew its own lamp. Now considering this vision of vague growth simply as an atmosphere and an impression on the minds of the young, (apart from its truth or

falsehood) there is no doubt that it tends so far as it goes to the notion of most things being much of a muchness, being all equally inevitable fruits of the same tree; and certainly not towards the idea of moral choice and conflict; of a contrast between black and white or a battle between light and darkness.

I am not writing controversially or trying to pin anybody with this as an individual necessity. I am writing educationally and considering the probable psychological impression of certain atmospheres and fine shades. I say that a great deal of evolution in education would not make that education very insistent on the ideas of free will and fighting morality; of dramatic choice and challenge. Why should one fruit challenge another fruit on the same tree; or how can there be a black and white choice between its slow gradations of green? So that even if we ignore the primary question of religion in the sense of the purpose of creation, there is the same sort of problem about religion even if we use it in the sense of the purpose of doing good. If a man believes that there is between vice and virtue a chasm like that of life and death, he will want to say so. And if other people only say that everything is a growth of evolution, he will not admit that they have said what he wishes to say. It is not merely a question of secular education that seems indifferent to religion, but of scientific education that seems rather indifferent to ethics. I am talking about educational effects, as educationists do; and decline any sort of sentimental recrimination about the pure and noble aims of men of science. Many who would despise anything so classical as the teaching of rhetoric, are always ready with any amount of rhetoric in praise of the teaching of science. I am not attacking the teaching of science, still less the teachers of science; I am saying the teaching of evolution, if it becomes an atmosphere, cannot be an atmosphere favourable to moral fire or a fighting spirit. To put it shortly, the teaching of evolution is hardly the training for revolution.

It is hardly likely to give a special strength to the feeling that some things are intrinsically intolerable or other things imperatively just. When a reformer can only say to a slavedriver, "You are evolving too slow; you ought to have emerged from the slave-state," the slave-driver has only to answer, "You are evolving too fast; you ought to wait for the twenty-first century." Such an argument will hardly set in a flame the fanaticism of Harper's Ferry. It seems to me, therefore, that the poor Puritans of Tennessee are not altogether wrong, as a matter of educational psychology, if they say that evolutionary education, even if it is not an attack on Christian doctrine, may become an atmosphere very alien to Christian morals; or indeed any manly and combative sort of morals. After the doctrine that existence is a thing of design, the next most interesting doctrine is that life is a thing of choice; and even if men were all taught to be atheists, I doubt whether mere evolutionism would have taught them to be really spirited and warlike atheists. And to see atheists lose their one great virtue of ferocity would indeed be a serious loss to religion.

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