

SPIRITUALITY AND CHILDREN

Joe Mannath SDB

Department of Christianity
University of Madras, Chennai

Right at the start of his book, *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood*, Edward Robinson gives the following quotation from Edwin Muir:

The child has a picture of human existence peculiar to himself, which he probably never remembers after he has lost it: the original vision of the world. I think of this picture or vision as that of a state in which the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life of every human being are related to the sky overarching them; as if the sky fitted the earth and the earth the sky. Certain dreams convince me that a child has this vision, in which there is a completer harmony of all things with each other than he will ever know again.¹

This article, as the title says, deals with "spirituality and children." I am consciously avoiding the term "the spirituality of children," since it may make readers think of a childish version of what adults mean by "spirituality." I want to look at two aspects of the question, namely, what we so-called "grown-ups" – Who is truly grown up, any way? – can learn from children, and what we need to do if we are to provide children with helps on their spiritual journey. My sources are largely psychologists who have studied childhood, either as their main area of interest, or as one of the stages of human development. The other group of authors are

¹ Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1983, v.

those who have explored the religious experience of people of different age groups. To the first group belong Erik Erikson, James Fowler, Lawrence Kohlberg, Jean Piaget, Robert Kegan, and, above all, Robert Coles, whose monumental research on the inner lives of children is a treasure house. To the second group belong Alister Hardy and Edward Robinson. A third group of authors that should rightfully be mentioned here is the galaxy of contemporary spiritual writers. There is a real wealth of scholarly and popular writing today in the area of spirituality. Their understandings of spirituality, as well as the realistic and comprehensive way they discuss spirituality, would be an integral part of such a study, but it would take us far beyond the confines of a short article. For reasons of practicality, I shall simply stick to my own understanding of spirituality, which is: "living lovingly, wisely and responsibly in one's concrete setting, with one's unique talents and limitations." Spirituality can, for the purposes of this article, be also taken simply as being led by God, or being in touch with one's inner life – something other than one's physical needs, mental development and emotional reactions. Some of the cases quoted below will, I hope, make this distinction clearer.

Why would anyone want to look at childhood in the exploration of spirituality? For two very obvious reasons, at least: (1) Human life is a journey – an unfinished journey during which we are never fully mature, but can, at best, be only maturing. Every stage of this development is meaningful, and serves a valid purpose. For us, who believe in the Incarnation, this truth is all the more unquestionable, since the Son of God did not think it a foolish waste to go through all the normal stages of human growth – conception and life in the womb, birth and infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. (2) Theology is largely the work of older people – that, too, older males, many of whom unmarried – who write generally for other older males. One of the sobering truths about theological writings is that they do not interest the vast majority of even committed believers. It is a well-known fact that most young people, including seminarians (who have to do years of theology as part of the required studies for priesthood) are uninterested in theology. This dryness of theological contributions could be remedied in part by incorporating the experience and questions of lay persons, especially women, youth and children. Some of the world's most famous and most lasting writings are children's stories. They contain much wisdom, for both children

and adults. Even today, there is much we can learn about life (and spirituality) from children—and from scholars who have taken pains to listen to children with openness and humility. There is a freshness and directness in the child's perception of life that most of us, grown-ups, unfortunately lose too soon.

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No one probably has explored the inner lives of children as deeply and as consistently as psychiatrist and Harvard professor, Robert Coles. Sociologist and best-selling novelist Andrew Greeley described Coles as "scientist, humanist, political activist, psychiatrist, minstrel, wandering storyteller, mystic, wise man, poet, dissenter, and yes, I'll use the word, secular saint." According to Alvin P. Sanoff of *U.S News and World Report*, "Robert Coles has told us more about the diverse and complex lives of children than any other scholar of his generation." After his much-acclaimed five-volume *Children of Crisis*, Coles went on to write *The Moral Life of Children*, *The Political Life of Children* and *The Child in Our Times*. The culminating work of the series is *The Spiritual Life of Children*, in which Coles brings to an end some thirty years of well-researched writing about children.²

Coles dedicated much quality time and persistent effort to *listen* to children and learn from them – something most adults fail to do. One dramatic example is his meeting with Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old black child whom Martin Luther King Jr. called a "hero of the civil rights movement." During the months of desegregation of schools, Ruby walked to school facing crowds of white parents who hurled the worst imaginable insults at her, and threatened her. How did she get her courage? This is what her (white) teacher had to say:

I watch her walking with those federal marshals, and you can't help but hear what the people say to her. They're ready to kill her. They call her the worst names imaginable. I never wanted "integration," but I couldn't say those things to any child, no matter what her race. She smiles at them – and they're saying

² Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990.

they are going to kill her. There must be 40 or 50 grown men and women out on those streets every morning and every afternoon, sometimes more. One of the marshals said to me the other day: "That girl, she's got guts; she's got more courage than I've ever see anyone have." And he told me he'd been in the war; he was in the army that landed in Normandy in 1944. He told me Ruby didn't even seem afraid – and she sure remembered how scared they all were sailing to France. I agree with him; she doesn't seem afraid. There was a time, at the beginning, that I thought she wasn't too bright, you know, and so that was why she could be so brave on the street. But she's a bright child, and she learns well. She knows what's happening, and she knows that they *could* kill her. They look as mean as can be. But she keeps coming here, and she told me the other day that she feels sorry for all of them, and she's praying for them. Can you imagine that?³

The greatness of Coles lies at least in part in this, that he listened to children like Ruby, without trying to fit them into his psychiatric categories. In fact, he left their experiences and witness challenge the dogmas of his profession. When Ruby would reply to his quizzing about whether she was not afraid by saying, "I do what my granny says; I keep praying," Coles did not reduce this to a mechanism of defense, as his training would tempt him to do. He is honest enough to make this unusual confession: "My kind, trained in psychoanalytic psychiatry, has a far easier time probing psycho-pathology than appreciating the sources of strength and vitality and resiliency in the ordinary lives of people, never mind in the lives of our various heroes."⁴

Heroic children were by no means the only kind Coles studies. He went into class rooms, asked children about God, religion, morality and other central issues and listened to the moving conversations among children and with him. His famous **The Spiritual Life of Children** carries the text of many such conversations, as well as the drawings done by children to represent religious themes.⁵

³ Robert Coles, *Harvard Diary: Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1996, 113-114.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵ See Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*.

Famous authors are by no means the only adult "learners" impressed by the wisdom of children. Many of us may have had the kind of experiences the following persons were privileged to have.

Katherine is a young wife and mother of two boys and a little baby girl. When she came to see me with Laura, her little daughter, she told me how she knew she was going to have a daughter. She wanted very much to have a daughter, but did not know what was God's will in her regard. One day, her younger son, James, told her: "Mummy, I am going to have a little sister." "How do you know, James?" "Because God told me." Sure enough, Katherine went to the hospital for a test, and found she was pregnant!

James is a famous professor of psychology in a well-known European university. When I visited him, we sat around chatting, with his wife and six-year-old daughter, Julia. James told me: "We often sit around like this, holding hands and listening to music. One day, as we held each other and listened to music, Julia says, 'When we are together like this, I feel God is in my heart.' She paused and added, 'And I am in the heart of God.' This is not an expression she had picked up from us."

Dominic was a little boy when the following incident took place. After the family prayers of the evening, he did not get up and join the family for dinner. When his parents asked him why, wondering whether he was not feeling well, this is what he said: "We recite the Our Father everyday. In fact, you taught me to say this prayer. In it, we say, 'Forgive us, as we forgive those who hurt us.' But you - he said this to his father - and your brother have not been talking to each other for seventeen years. This is what I have heard." The shocked parents sat up the whole night to discuss what their youngest son had just said. They saw that he was right. How could they teach him the faith, if they did the opposite of what Jesus taught? Early morning, they woke up Dominic, and told him, "Come with us; we are going to visit your uncle." They hired a cab, and drove straight to the house of a sibling whom they had not visited in seventeen years. On seeing them arrive, the uncle wondered what had happened. The parents were too embarrassed to explain, and asked Dominic to tell his uncle why they had come. He did. Then the two long estranged brothers sat next to each other and wept.

Children very often see the essentials clearer than we do. They seem to have a knack to get to the heart of the matter. They do not get lost in word play and power games as easily as grown-ups seem to do.

Do they also valid real and deep God-experiences that are not mere childish fantasies? Research shows in fact that they do.

The largest research ever conducted on the religious experience of ordinary people is that undertaken by the Alister Hardy Centre in Oxford. Hardy was not a theologian, but a marine biologist. Convinced that a serious study should start with reliable data, he invited people to send in accounts of their religious experiences. The centre was soon flooded with responses. Hardy presented his methodology and main findings in book form.⁶ What interests us here is that many persons recalled profound spiritual experiences they had had as children.

Of the thousands of people who responded to our request for accounts of their experience, Hardy writes, some fifteen per cent started with some reference to their childhood. They were not asked to do this but, as one letter explained, 'It is only today, gathering up the threads as it were, that I realize that this childhood experience set the pattern for subsequent ones.' Edward Robinson, who succeeded me as director of the Unit, was particularly interested in seeing how often an early experience had had a deep effect on religious outlook in later years, so he wrote to the people concerned with a series of questions designed to throw further light upon the nature of that experience and the spiritual development that followed.⁷

Robinson published some of his findings in *The Times Literary Supplement*. Here are a few revealing excerpts:

I think from my childhood I have always had the feeling that the true reality is not to be found in the world as the average person sees it. There seems to be a constant force at work from the inside trying to push its way to the surface of consciousness. The mind is continually trying to create a symbol sufficiently comprehensive to contain it, but this always ends up in failure.

⁶ Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

My childhood experiences were extremely vivid and significant and authentic. Those that I had as an adult were of the same kind in the sense that an apple follows apple blossom.

Several felt that education was not a help, but a block:

I feel that all my education was a block and a barrier to real religious experience. I was always wary of delving too deeply into mystery and crossing thresholds. In adolescence I had the good fortune to find one wise teacher who understood my experience. It was a great joy to find even for this short period of months one teacher who understood "mystery."⁸

Looking back on their childhood religious experiences most writers felt they were highly significant. The *words* to describe the experience changed with age, but the *sense* of the experience remained clear.⁹

Interestingly, most did not think that they had these experiences because of their family background; in fact, a number of them contrasted their family situation with their religious experience. As for schooling, most recalled it as an obstacle to spirituality. Accounts include statements such as, "I do not connect any religious awareness with my school life," or "Religion at school was hell."¹⁰

What others missed was finding an understanding adult:

My problem was to find someone who understood, and would allow me to express, the rich life and perceptions within.

One could absorb from those from whom love emanated, whereas fear shrivelled and made stupid.

In my childhood we daren't let our elders know how mature we were. As for religious feelings and ideas – they'd been there all along.

This inner knowledge was exciting and absorbingly interesting, but it remained unsaid because, even if I could have expressed it, no one would have understood. Once, when I tried it, I was told I was morbid.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 105-106.

⁹ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰ Ibid., 107.

¹¹ Ibid., 107-108.

Childhood, in other words, is not merely a significant period for biological and emotional development; it is a time of meaningful spiritual experience, with deep impact on a person's future development. Many adults have given accounts of the very authentic spiritual experience they had as children.

The works of Alister Hardy, Edward Robinson and, above all, Robert Coles contain many witnesses – both children and adults – who testify to the truth of this statement.

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There is another group of experts we need to learn from in the area of human development. The developmental theories of Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler and Robert Kegan have much to teach us about the different stages of psycho-social and religious development. For each of them, childhood is a very significant stage of development, leaving deep marks on the rest of one's life.

Let me present some of their key insights which have a bearing on our topic.

Erik Erikson's influence on other psychologists and on religious writers is undeniable. The first of his eight stages of psycho-social development is infancy, where the key issue is trust versus mistrust.¹² This, according to Erikson, is an important stage for all religious development, since trust is a basic virtue in religion. The danger of wanting to keep people in infantile dependence is one of the dangers of organized religion, but trust by itself does not imply such childishness. In other words, we can do more for a person's religious development by providing him or her with reliable and trustworthy adults during infancy than by "religious" instruction or brainwashing.

James Pratt, a brilliant pioneer in psychology and a devout Christian, made this suggestion regarding the religious education

¹² Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, New York: Norton, 1950; *Identity and the Life Cycle*, New York: Norton, 1994. In these and other writings, Erikson presented a theory of human development which is among the most complete and most influential in all of psychology.

of children: Persons of deep spirituality should teach children the meaning of the church's worship and experience.¹³ Exposure to spirituality of genuine persons is far more important than learning the right doctrines by heart.

For Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan, the key issue in human development is the search for meaning. On this search, the human being moves from embeddedness to autonomy. Childhood is a significant stage on this journey, though not more radically than later stages.¹⁴

A very important author for the topic we are exploring is James Fowler, whose seminar research on faith development is well known. For him, too, childhood must be taken seriously. Our faith journey does not begin when we are adolescents or adults. It starts in infancy. Each stage has its challenges, needs and strengths.¹⁵

For those interested in the typically Indian way of growing up, the works of psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar are a must. Kakar has analyzed different aspects of Indian life from the perspective of psychology, including childhood and family life.¹⁶

Human life needs to be seen as a journey of development that extends from conception and birth up to old age and death. The psychologists we have quoted – and others influenced by them – take their findings seriously. In fact, one of the central concerns of contemporary psychology is human development, with its normal stages and possible aberrations.¹⁷

¹³ James Pratt, *Eternal Values in Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1950, as quoted in David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991, 511.

¹⁴ Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

¹⁵ Richard Osmer & James W. Fowler, "Childhood and Adolescence – A Faith Development Perspective," in Robert J. Wicks, Richard D Parsons & Donald E. Capps (eds), *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, New York & Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985; James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

¹⁶ Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Tenth impression, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹⁷ See, for instance: Daniel Offer & Melvin Sabshin (eds.), *Normality and the Life Cycle*, New York: Basic Books, 1984.

Why quote them here?

For this simple reason: Spirituality or religion cannot be forced on a child. A loveless presentation of religion or spirituality is worse than not hearing of it at all. All in all, there is much wisdom in the words of Oscar Wilde: "The best way to make children good is to make them happy."

Spirituality is not a dry subject meant for retired people or for those who do not have to struggle with earning their livelihood or caring for others. Spirituality is the most practical aspect of life, or it is bogus. It helps us face the ups and downs of life with strength, meaning and optimism. It is sustained by inner experience and the witness of genuine seekers. Such experience and such witness, research shows, are not restricted to any age group, or nation or religion.

Children are not passive or pliant recipients of the religious ideas of adults. They are bearers of genuine spiritual experience and insight, although the capacity to articulate this experience in a way that makes sense to adults comes much later. Children have precious lessons to teach us.

In our turn, we, grown-ups, can contribute to a child's spiritual growth, not so much through religious indoctrination, but by providing the witness of joyful and loving life that is inspired by faith; by being adults whom they can trust; by providing a happy and secure environment where they can play as freely and pray; and by taking their inner experience seriously. They are growing up, and so are we. In this journey, every one of us has much to learn from all the others. We can learn precious lessons about the spiritual life not only from Teresa of Avila or Ignatius of Loyola; not only from authors and spiritual directions; but also from Ruby and Julia and Dominic and the children you play with and care for.

Children will also teach us – especially those of us who are engaged in such "serious" adult activities as doing theology – not to lose our childlike freshness, spontaneity and openness to all life. Talking with children and listening to them with openness will not make us more childish; far from it. It will make more complete – and more lovable – human beings (a far more important thing any day than being a clever theologian).