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Thinking and Feeling in Education

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CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Thinking and Feeling in Education

ROBERT L. CONRAD

Mission:Life

JOHN S. DAMM

Theology — Philosophy — Poetry: Toward a Synopsis

ERWIN L. LUEKER

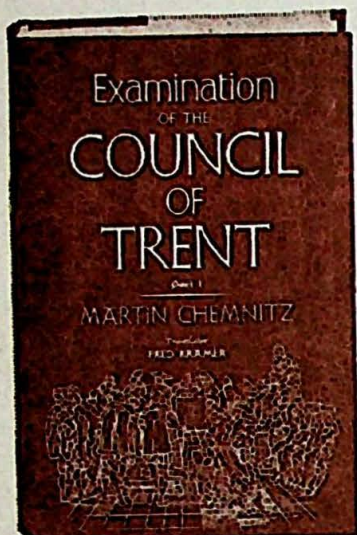
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July-August

Number 7



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Thinking and Feeling in Education

ROBERT L. CONRAD

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One of the troubles with teachers in the church and in public education is that they are adults. They do not think and imagine like children, but they take the results of adult thought and expect children to handle them. At the same time, their own education has led them to be suspicious of feelings and imagination, so that they ignore the feelings of children or try to get them to control their feelings and imagination with rational thought. Both of these tendencies have been challenged by recent studies. It has become apparent that children *develop* in their ability to think and their progress in that development must be taken into account. It has also become apparent that feelings and imagination play a great part in the way in which children (and adults) perceive and shape their world. Teachers in the church and in public education cannot afford to ignore this aspect of human existence lest they stifle the greatest source of creative learning.

I

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT

The man most responsible for bringing about a new understanding of the development of thought in children is Jean Piaget, the Swiss founder of the International Center for Genetic Epistemology at Geneva. Piaget carefully observed, questioned, and tested children, including his own, for

a number of years. The results have been published in a veritable library of books. Many of these have been translated from the French and are now available in English. The best introduction to Piaget is *Six Psychological Studies*, a collection of Piaget's essays with introduction, notes, and glossary by David Elkind.¹ The book contains an extensive bibliography of Piaget's works.

The basic problem in the development of thought, according to Piaget, is to arrive at a balance between assimilation (making the environment fit the structures of the self) and accommodation (making the structures of the self fit the environment). In the process of arriving at such a balance the child imaginatively "plays" with the world or strictly imitates it. From birth to about 2 years of age a child moves from profound egocentrism (an inability to see the world in any way but with the self as center) to a distinction between self and environment. Essential to this growing distinction is the physical handling and manipulation of objects in the child's world. Piaget labels this the *sensori-motor* stage.

From ages 2 to 7 the child is in the *intuitive* stage. The child handles his world through internal images, and, since

¹ New York: Random House, 1967; Vintage Books No. 462.

they are his own images of the world, he remains highly egocentric. The use of language gives an ability to label objects, but there is little or no ability to relate objects in any logical manner. The child uses "transductive" thought, that is, attention is focused on only one aspect of an object or situation while other aspects are ignored. Things cannot be "tested out" by thinking forward to consequences and back again to the present state. The child will sometimes "play" with the world and at other times imitate it. The stage of *concrete* thought is entered at age 7 and lasts until approximately age 11. At this time there is a growing ability to use concepts (organized patterns of thought) and to test out certain problems by thinking forward to the consequences. This ability is limited, however, to concrete situations and actions. There is little or no ability to form abstract generalizations beyond the concrete instance. It is only from age 11 on that an adult level of thought becomes possible. The child begins to think abstractly (apart from concrete reality) and to determine whether something is true or false. Inductive thought (moving from facts to general conclusions) and deductive thought (starting with a proposition and testing it out) is now possible. This last stage is that of *formal* thought.

Jean Piaget has not spelled out the implications of his work for education. On the American scene that task has been attempted by Jerome Bruner, a psychologist at Harvard University. The best introduction to Bruner's work is his book *Toward a Theory of Instruction*.² Bruner suggests that there are three ways in which human

beings conserve and represent to themselves past experience. The first is through action (the *enactive* mode) upon the environment. This is what the very young child does. The second is through the use of images (the *iconic* mode) through which things are represented and transformed. This mode predominates in early childhood, paralleling Piaget's intuitive stage. The third mode is representation in words or language (the *symbolic* mode). This mode is linked to conceptual thought and is predominant in later childhood and early adolescence. The educator, Bruner insists, should take into account the mode of representation being used by children at given ages and use it to bring to children the significant aspects of knowledge needed by them. Thus children can be meaningfully and responsibly influenced and shaped by those responsible for their education. This assumption, however, ignores the fact that children *shape* their world as well as are *shaped* by it, as we shall note later in the criticism of Richard Jones.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Piaget's model of cognitive growth was put to the test in religious education by Ronald Goldman, who did research with British school children, for whom religious education is still compulsory, ranging in age from 6 to 15. The results of his research are reported in *Religious Thinking From Childhood to Adolescence*.³ Goldman did not test religious thought in the sensori-motor stage but began with the later ages of the intuitive stage. In the

² New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966.

³ London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964. Available in paperback from Seabury Press.

young child (which Goldman put at ages 5 to 9) he found crude anthropomorphic ideas about God and Jesus. Feeling and fantasy were primary. Therefore Goldman recommended that more should be taught in terms of influence than of instruction at this age. Many activities suggested by children and meaningful to them should be used. The late *junior* and *pre-adolescent* age (ages 9 to 12 or 13) was found to be a time between fantasy and adult logic. A dualistic way of looking at God's activity in the natural world became evident, one theological and one scientific. This is a dualism that according to Goldman should be faced and reconciled. The growing cognitive ability of children at this age indicates that they can handle a systematic presentation of the life of Jesus and other selected Biblical material. The *adolescent* age in religious thinking begins about the 13th year. At this age children have the ability to think like adults and can be introduced to the great themes and grand sweep of the Bible.

Readers may not agree with some of the theological positions of Ronald Goldman, but his research strongly indicates the need to rethink the approach to children in religious education. Two things, especially, should be noted. The first is that development of religious thought is slower than the development of general thought. (Note that Piaget marks the breaks between stages at ages 7 and 11 while Goldman found the breaks to be about ages 9 and 13.) Goldman attributes this to the possibility that religious thought is secondary, that is, it is dependent on the understanding of general experience first, and to the possibility that poor or premature teaching confuses children. Second,

feeling and experience should be the basis for early religious education, while formal content should be gradually introduced at later ages. This is a reversal of what has often been customary in religious education. Goldman develops his program recommendations at greater length in his second volume, *Readiness for Religion*.⁴ As helpful as Goldman is, however, he tends to restrict religious education to propositional thinking and thus ignores dimensions other than the cognitive.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

The research of Jean Piaget has triggered many related developments in public education. His insistence that a child must handle and "play" with his world according to his own interests in order to learn has been especially provocative. A great impetus for structuring education to make Piaget's dictum possible occurred in England with the publication of *Children and Their Primary Schools*, a 1967 report of Great Britain's Central Advisory Council for Education. It is popularly known as the Plowden Report, after Lady Bridget Plowden, chairman of the council. The report indicated that one third of the primary schools in England had already dispensed with a fixed curriculum, a teacher-dominated classroom, and narrowly focused one-way teaching measured by tests and had replaced them with open classroom techniques and practices. The drafters of the report clearly indicated the benefits of the latter approach, which is characterized by four principles. First, the room itself is decentralized — an open flex-

⁴ London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965. Also available in paperback from Seabury Press.

ible space divided into functional areas rather than one fixed, homogeneous unit. Second, the children are free for much of the time to explore this room, individually or in groups, and to choose their own activities. Third, the environment is rich in learning resources, including many concrete materials as well as books and other media. Fourth, the teacher and her aides work most of the time with children as individuals or in groups of two or three, hardly ever presenting the same material to the class as a whole. Since the Plowden Report many more British schools have moved toward the open classroom.

A few private schools in Britain have practiced the principles of the open classroom for some time. A glimpse into one of these schools is given by A. S. Neill in *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*.⁵ The person principally responsible for the introduction of the open classroom in the United States is Prof. Lillian Weber of the City College of New York, although her book on British schools and the open classroom has not yet been published. However, George B. Leonard has provided a glimpse into the possibilities of restructuring education in his *Education and Ecstasy*.⁶ Of less visionary and more practical importance is Herbert R. Kohl's *The Open Classroom: A Practical Guide to a New Way of Teaching*.⁷ Some public schools and a handful of parochial schools in the United States have begun to experiment with the open classroom. Many more schools will join the experimenters in the near future.

⁵ New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1969.

⁶ New York: Delacorte Press, 1968.

⁷ New York: A New York Review Book, 1969.

II

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELING AND IMAGINATION

An understanding of the development of thought in a child is only half the story. Richard M. Jones insists that education must also take account of the child's feeling and imagination. He presents his case in *Fantasy and Feeling in Education*.⁸ Jones's "friendly enemy" is Jerome Bruner, whom he accuses of having a rationalistic impact on educators because of his emphasis on cognition and intellect. Bruner's view, Jones says, assumes that the emotions will take care of themselves. They will not. Uncared for, they can lead to crippling anxiety. Imagination plus aloneness plus helplessness equals anxiety that needs psychotherapeutic treatment. But education can put imagination into the context of community and mastery so that creative learning results. Such creative learning uses *outsight*, the grasping, enlivening, enhancing, discovering of data in the world by gracing it with one's own private image. Bruner has insisted on *insight*, the discovery of the meaning of external data in their objective reality. Both insight and *outsight* are needed, Jones insists.

In order to give a complete picture of the developing person Jones constructs a chart showing not only Piaget's stages of cognitive development but also Erik Erikson's ages of emotional development. In *Childhood and Society*⁹ Erikson developed the "eight ages of man," an outline of the epigenetic sequence of the emotional crises

⁸ New York: Harper & Row, 1968.

⁹ New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1950 (2d. ed., 1963).

that persons face from the infant's "trust and mistrust" to the aged person's "integrity and despair." Each age, to be sure, has its cognitive skills, but each age also has its emotional crises and imaginal themes. Jones has made a significant contribution to education and offered a great challenge to educators.

FEELINGS AND IMAGINATION IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

No one has yet done the kind of research on feelings and imagination in religious education that Ronald Goldman has done on thought. However, some writers have recently produced theological explorations on the role of feelings and imagination in Christian thought and life. One of the most provocative of these is Sam Keen's *Apology for Wonder*.¹⁰ A stress on rationality and control is called the Apollonian Way by Keen. He insists that this is the style that has come to dominate our age, an age of science and technology which seeks to dominate and control the environment. By way of contrast, the Dionysian Way seeks to remain open to the diverse and sometimes contradictory streams that flow through the depths of man. This style deserves emphasis in our day, says Keen. Either style kills in the extreme, the one by boxing persons in and stifling them and the other by removing any bases or boundaries for human existence. The Christian man is one who finds a balance between the two, a balance between Dionysian wonder which keeps possibilities open and Apollonian recognition of temporal limitations. Regardless of a reader's ultimate critique

¹⁰ New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

of Keen's theological treatment of the matter, his insight into the place of wonder and, therefore, the place of feelings and imagination in Christianity is valuable.

Two recent books in Christian education for adults emphasize the role of feelings and imagination. In *Learning Through Encounter: Experiential Education in the Church*¹¹ Robert Arthur Dow examines the theological and behavioral bases for experiential Christian education in encounters with other persons in groups of various sizes. He also gives many methods for helping persons to reflect on what they are experiencing in order that they might understand what is happening and learn to be more open and trusting in their relationships with others. Martha Leypoldt, in *Learning Is Change: Adult Education in the Church*,¹² addresses herself to the would-be teacher of adults and provides many reflective activities for the reader, so that he can gain greater insight into understandings and feelings of the self. She also provides many helpful ways in which adults can reflect upon their knowing, feeling, and acting as Christian persons. The two books complement each other. Dow is more theoretical, while Leypoldt is eminently practical. While it is possible to criticize both authors for their emphasis on the experiential at the expense of the historical, their contributions to an understanding of feelings and imagination and how to work with them in Christian education can be appreciated. More needs to be done in this area for the Christian education of children.

¹¹ Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971.

¹² Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971.

FEELINGS AND IMAGINATION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

More exploration and implementation of ways to deal with the feelings and imagination of children needs to be done in public education also. One could argue that the open classroom movement provides a way for feelings and imagination to be taken into account. However, Jones's challenge deserves more specific attention than that. One recent trend in public education that may ultimately provide for feelings and imagination is the emphasis on *values* in education. Louis E. Rath, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon in *Values and Teaching: Working with Values in the Classroom*¹³ provide a valuable guide for helping children clarify their values. The authors are not concerned with particular values but with the *process* of valuing. An adult who would encourage children to develop values would do the following: encourage them to make choices and to make them freely within the bounds of possibility; help them to discover and to examine available alternatives when faced with choices; help them to weigh

¹³ Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1966.

alternatives thoughtfully, reflecting on the consequences of each; encourage them to consider what it is that they prize and cherish; give them opportunities to make public affirmations of their choices; encourage them to act, behave, and live in accordance with their choices; and help them to examine repeated behaviors or patterns in their life. This is a valuable approach in helping children, especially at upper elementary levels and beyond, to choose, prize, and act on personally held values. Christians can criticize the authors for their assumptions about the relativity of values but can, at the same time, appreciate their approach to help children really to make values their own. Unfortunately, the authors try to make a distinction between emotional needs, thinking, and valuing—a distinction that is unconvincing. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of merit in the continuing attention to values in public education, for the area of values is one in which feelings and imagination play a great part. More has been said and more will be said about values in education, and Christian educators will do well to learn from the discussion as it proceeds.

St. Louis, Mo.