

THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

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There is a clear need to provide our children with healthy religious knowledge, in the family and at school, before their brains become full of superstition and sophistry passing as religious information. But what are the methods and ways which are suitable for this effort? We must accept the fact that this is not a simple, ordinary task. This important work demands collaboration among a number of scholars who are specialists in their respective fields. We must, after all, come to a better knowledge of children's psychology. Accordingly, the insights of psychology must be utilized in applying types of pedagogic methods. At the same time, we must not forget the necessity of harmonizing the specific studies within the general principles of pedagogy and didactic systems. My point is that there must not be any contradictions or inconsistencies between the methodology of general education and that of religious education.

If religious education is different from and inconsistent with the methods of general education, it is inevitable that there be negative effects on the psychology of the children. For example, a student will find religious subjects unattractive if religious lessons are forced upon the children by methods of domination and employ methods of rote memorization. Along with his religious lessons, the student is, at the same time, taking other subjects in which more positive and active methods are employed. Even if we apply sound and healthy religious teaching after the children have already been forced, it will be difficult to overcome the negative effects which resulted at the beginning of his religious studies.

One of the most important elements of the religious education of children is that there is no doubt that religion teachers themselves must know better the important aspects of their own religion and understand them from healthy sources. If the basic religious principles which are given to students are not based on healthy sources, it will be very difficult to remove later the negative effects of these teachings on their minds and hearts. Everyone knows these facts and the bad results of

false applications. We know that experiences and knowledge which are taken on in the time of childhood have an important influence on human character. This knowledge and experience can be regarded as the foundation stones of the human character. If we try to uproot one or more of these foundation stones, in one way or another, from the human personality, the person may suffer a great depression. The spread of such depression can cause unhappiness in personal life and disorder in society. No society or state desires such big problems.

In Turkey, students begin to take their religious lessons at the fourth class of elementary school. Before this time, a child can learn and have some religious experience from his family and environment; it is sometimes the case that he will have taken Qur'an courses which are held at the mosques, especially during the summer holidays. In fact, this knowledge, in what may be called informal education, is not systematic and depends upon memorizing by heart. If some wrong religious information should be presented to children as correct religious teaching, this wrong information can contradict sound religious teaching. To eliminate these contradictions is not easy. Unless these contradictions are faced and resolved, the child will become fanatic or narrow-minded or, what is the opposite of this situation, he could develop hostility and negative feelings about religion and turn out to have an unpleasant personality. For these reasons, we must not allow ourselves to be unaware of the child's previous religious training.

Approximately 1.5 or 2 million people of the Turkish population still live in various European states. The Turkish child obtains his formal education in the schools of Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Austria. I cannot say that, until very recent times, these Turkish children have received systematic religious education. However, in 1979, Germany began a serious and scientific study about the religious education of Turkish children. Generally, as in other Western countries, in the Federal Republic of Germany, religious education begins in the first years of the elementary schools. For this reason, the religious education of those children who have great difficulty reading and writing the language is a question of great concern for us. But I feel that there are no great difficulties for Germans in this matter, because they have had useful experiences in raising their own children according to Protestant or Catholic principles. As a matter of fact, they have prepared a good curriculum which is in harmony with the pedagogical principles of the general educational system of Germany. They have printed textbooks and teachers' manuals for the first and second classes of elementary

school. According to my opinion, this is a positive step towards a genuine solution.

For uneducated children with problems in reading and writing, they have prepared texts illustrated with pictures. In this way, some religious and moral teachings can be communicated to the children.

In the contemporary world, the means of communication and learning, such as television, video-cassettes, radio, tape-recorders, and the like, play an important role in the child's world. In addition to teaching attitudes of love and compassion, religious and moral principles form suitable elements in the goals of modern education.

At the time when I acted as representative of Turkey as scientific and religious advisor for Turkish children in Germany, I had eyewitness experience which could be regarded as original for my people. I am very happy to repeat this fact here. My wish is that all administrators and organizers throughout the world can create realistic and useful religious education and teaching for all people.