

Celebration Sunday: Celebrating Religious Education and the Life of Sophia Lyon Fahs
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She was born when the ink was barely dry on Darwin's "Origin of Species". By the time of her death, men had walked on the moon. During the one hundred and one years of her life, she became the pre-eminent expert in the field of religious education for children, and changed forever how Unitarians, and others, do church school.

Who was she? What did she do? What did she teach?

Sophia Blanche Lyon was born into a family of American Presbyterian missionaries in China, where she spent her early childhood. As a young woman she attended Wooster College in Ohio and thought to commit her life to the mission field. She continued her education in Chicago, where she met and married Harvey Fahs, also mission bound. Their work took them no farther than New York City, for most of their life.

Sophia was fortunate in her marriage. Together, she and Harvey brought five children into the world. They enjoyed a life filled with family, friends, and meaningful work. Both Sophia and Harvey pursued rewarding careers. They made a difference.

Harvey's work was with the YMCA and the organization that backed up overseas missions. Sophia, in addition to childcare, continued to pursue further education, in teaching and in theology. In time, she became a teacher where she had been taught.

Sophia Lyon Fahs studied under progressive educator John Dewey at Columbia University. From Dewey she learned a modernist, child-centered approach to education. This she extended into her area of special interest, religious education for children. This became her mission field.

The new child-centered approach meant putting aside old notions and starting off by observing real children, hearing their real issues, and teaching them in ways that were meaningful to the children. It became apparent very quickly that children were engaged by story and that the story had best have vivid, concrete detail. Children, it seemed, also learned from experience. Sophia observed children and learned from them.

Sophia needed a place to do field work. And if you were a teacher on Sophia's team you did indeed work. No Sunday lesson was complete until you had written up for Sophia a thorough report on your class. What were the children's issues? What questions did they ask? What answers did they offer? What engaged their interest?

For many years Sophia found her laboratory at Riverside Church in New York City. Riverside Church was largely the gift of a family named Rockefeller – yes, those Rockefellers—to ensure a pulpit for the modernist preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Even when the apparent lack of order in Sophia's classes prompted criticism, Mr. Rockefeller backed her up. He was confident she knew what she was doing.

In 1937 the Unitarians noticed that Sophia Lyon Fahs, by then a leader in her field, had figured out how to do RE progressively. They called her to Boston to revise and grow the Beacon Curriculum. And so she did.

Please note, Sophia Lyon Fahs was not a Unitarian at that time, and would not become one until after she retired from teaching at Columbia University. The Unitarians reached outside the denomination to Fahs because she was expert in her field. Fahs transformed Unitarian religious education. In time, she saw her new materials, created for the Unitarians, put to use by many different denominations.

We learned from our neighbours, and they learned from us.

What did Fahs do?

The first learning for Fahs, of a child-centred approach to religious education, was that a bible-based curriculum was not appropriate for very young children. And even Unitarians, at that time, were still teaching Sunday School based on the Bible.

Fahs estimated that seventy-five percent of the Bible was quite unsuitable for children. She chose to hold off on the Bible until children were old enough to engage scripture as a diverse and complex work. Instead, Fahs looked at stories and tales from all around the world.

Fahs recognized that even a new-born infant has a rich emotional life, with pressing needs and strong responses to the world around it. Religion, then, could be seen as a response to life, death, and what happens in between. Fahs looked to so-called primitive religions, and other story sources, looking to understand how that process worked, of creating a religion in response to life. Anthropology, psychology, and biology might be better sources for Sunday School stories than the Bible. Fahs gathered and wrote up collections of such stories, generating herself or in collaboration with colleagues the programmes and materials they needed.

And the programmes developed as the children developed. From close observation of the children, giving them room for free expression, Fahs learned to see religious significance in their concerns and responses.

Here follow some of the circumstances Fahs identified as significant to very young children, and therefore appropriate subject matter for their Sunday School classes.

Pre-school children were concerned about nature: the weather, the sun, moon, and stars. They were concerned about animation: what is alive and what is not and what is this mystery of being alive. The children were concerned about birth and death, two more profound mysteries, and about pain and sickness.

The children were intrigued, sometimes even frightened, by shadows; how does one understand one's shadow? They became aware of dreaming, and at that point they began to be aware of the difference between reality and fantasy.

The children were sensitive to the warmth of social relatedness, and the pain of social isolation, hostility, and rejection. And from understanding both relation and rejection together, they began to learn sympathy for those who experienced social isolation.

The children learned through personal achievement, through creativity, and through overcoming difficulty. They were concerned about making choices, learning both from success and from failure.

Finally, the children learned about religion through community life and through sharing in celebrations and religious ceremonial.

These were the issues of pre-school children and these were the issues that Fahs' new programmes and stories spoke to. Fahs' progressive, modernist, child-centred religious education met the children where they were.

Fahs' natural approach to religious education turned aside from a traditional approach of authority and indoctrination. Instead, the natural approach she embraced was developmental, and recognized the interdependence of body, mind, and spirit. The natural approach to children's religious education trusted in the child's authentic emotions, their expressions of need, and yearnings for love.

Fahs saw children as naturally loving, trusting, and co-operative. She believed that science showed human nature to be essentially good. She sought to provide experiences for the children that would provoke wonder and thought and natural growth. Experience came first, then questions. The child's questions were to be received with understanding and respect. Fahs said, "Vital religion must, in large measure, be a personal creation, rather than primarily the gift of society ... or imposed doctrine" (Fahs 1952 p. 57).

Fahs introduced ways and means to work with children, derived from observation of children. Her model was child-based, developmental, and experiential. She trusted the child to grow and create a vital religion in a supportive atmosphere. These are now considered best practices.

As Fahs reached deeper and deeper, she was engaging some profound theological perspectives. Fahs speaks of these in a compelling book, "Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage: A Philosophy of Creative Religious Development", first published by Beacon press in 1952.

In 1952, what were the theological issues Fahs saw at the base of her teaching philosophy?

In her lifetime Fahs had seen traditional religion challenged by the sciences. Astronomy re-located us in space. Evolutionary biology re-located us in the great chain of being. Microscopes shattered our sense of the fabric of the world, right down to the atomic level, and our understanding of the very nature of matter. Scholarship had totally reframed traditional conceptions of scripture and revelation. Psychology re-framed our understanding of relationship and personality.

We could no longer sustain simplistic conceptions of the world we lived in. Nor could we sustain naive assumptions about good and evil. Fahs called us to reject the old mind set of moral dualism, of good versus evil, and God versus the devil. She called us to set aside such dualism in our understanding of our own natures, also. Instead of seeing the divine and the daemonic at war within us, Fahs urged that we try recognizing authentic feeling. She urged that we recognize the complexity of our choices, where good and evil are mixed up together. For example, in the classroom on a Sunday morning this might look like some genuine confusion and anger in a child in response to family dynamics such as divorce.

Fahs looked for spontaneity and honesty in engaging children's authentic emotions, instead of shame, silence, and repression. She hoped that understanding would lead to control of conduct within the bounds of safety and respect for the persons and property of others. She urged that we recognize the conflicts within ourselves not as simply the struggle between good and evil, but as a struggle between conflicting desires wherein we might seek out a balance we could live with.

Fahs urged that we respect our own immaturity, because learning to live is an evolutionary process. She lifted up the hope for a whole self, moving through an integrative process into self-awareness, capable of making intelligent, useful choices.

What does that whole-self integrative process mean for religious education? According to Fahs, wholeness means we enlarge our sense of god and the holy to something as wide as the whole world and the whole self. Wholeness means we grow our own, authentic, inner engagement of idealism, rather than surrender to an exterior image of idealism taken from

somewhere else. Wholeness means optimism and respect for all humanity. Wholeness means there are no limits on subject matter for religious study.

Indeed, Fahs called us to engage nature and work out an ethical response, not just to humanity, but also to the natural world. Fahs urged us to understand Nature, to respect nature, and to be co-creators with nature, because our relationships with other people are bound up in issues of equity and justice that involve the natural world.

Reading her publication of 1952, I hear in her words a prophetic voice, still keenly relevant more than half a century later.

Essentially, we still do Religious Education much in the way Fahs taught: child-centred, experiential, developmental, integrative. But our world is no longer hers.

In our world, more people are “un-churched” than regularly attend any faith community. In our world biblical literacy or religious literacy cannot be taken for granted. In our world, mass media, popular culture, and consumerism daily assault us and propagandize our children.

Accordingly, we have in some ways changed how we do religious education since Fahs taught fifty years ago. No longer do we teach – as the old joke would have it – every religion but our own. From gazing around the world we have now turned to look more within our own faith traditions, and go more inside, and deeper. We are less shy now to impart and articulate the values we wish to pass along.

As was said by Antoine de St.-Exupéry, “Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations. [There is a] heritage of mind and heart [through which we] impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, [so that] they will [not] lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder”. [hymnal #649).

In conclusion, two hundred years ago, the great Unitarian preacher, William Ellery Channing, challenged us, “to prepare [our children] for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision”. “Quicken and strengthen [their] power of thought”, said Channing. “Awaken their soul[s], ... excite and cherish [their] spiritual life [!]” “The great end in religious instruction”, he said, “is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see without eyes, but to look enquiringly and steadily with their own.”

One hundred years passed before Sophia Lyon Fahs showed Unitarians what Channing’s vision could look like: child-centred, experiential, and trusting the child to grow, with love and support, into a whole person, capable of creating a healthy, whole faith.

Sophia Lyon Fahs showed us how to honour our children's natural reverence, and our own inborn capacity for wonder and awe. "Each night a child is born," she said, "is a holy night, a time for singing, a time for wondering."

May you, too, keep alive within you the child's sense of wonder and awe. May you, too, never cease to grow.

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Bibliography

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