

MORAL EDUCATION  
IN THE  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

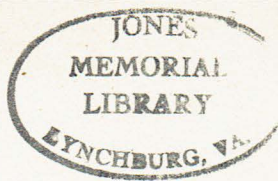


An Address Before The Sphex Club  
NOVEMBER 26th, 1937

By  
A. F. THOMAS



PUBLISHED BY MUTUAL PRESS, Inc., LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA



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## Moral Education in the Public Schools

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MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN:

The public policy of education at public expense rests upon the assumption that it makes better citizens.

Under no circumstances can an ignorant and depraved people develop a great State. The State, if she would improve, must begin with the individual citizen. Good citizens are not born but made by careful training. This training must develop his intellectual powers, his physical being and make more acute his moral perceptions.

A cultivated mind, a sound body and an active conscience are indispensable prerequisites to good citizenship.

It is therefore the imperative duty of the State to cultivate to the highest degree each of these elements in every citizen if she herself is to achieve her highest possible destiny. A system of education that does less than take care of these three essentials of good citizenship fails in its purpose because a partial result may often produce worse effects than if nothing had been done. An individual with a highly developed intellect, but devoid of spiritual force lacks the necessary qualifications for good citizenship and may become a public menace. To develop the physical powers to the neglect of the mind and soul is to make a strong brute. To develop the emotional nature beyond the control of matured judgment is to produce a fanatic who may commit crime under the conviction that he is doing God's service.

The ideal is to have the citizen with a sound, discriminating mind to acquire understanding, a strong, healthy body to perform the necessary work and a well trained, sensitive

moral nature that will govern both the mind and the body, keeping them in accord with moral law.

The bounden duty of the State is therefore to develop uniformly each of these essentials if she herself is to rise to her full stature.

The minds, the bodies and the souls of the people must be uniformly developed, if the hope for improved sociological conditions is to be realized. It is only when the harmonious, well rounded development of the individuals has been accomplished, that the State can expect to come into her own.

Virginia has progressively been striving to educate her people. She has spent millions for this purpose, but it admits of serious doubt if the results have been commensurate with what they might have been had the work been more correctly coördinated. The principal effort appears to have been to promote literacy — absolutely essential so far as it goes, but hopelessly inadequate if well-rounded citizenship is the State's objective.

It is gratifying to note that the claims of public health and physical development are gradually being recognized and better progress in these directions may be anticipated. It is a lamentable fact, however, that while the State has been spending millions for the development of the intellect and some little for physical improvement, she has left the soul of her people to atrophy and starve for lack of proper attention. It would be more correct to say for the lack of any attention at all. No objection is here made to the amount spent for education. It may well be true that even more should be spent for this purpose. The criticism is that the State is not getting its money's worth because the work is not well rounded and the method is turning out half-baked, partially educated people instead of those with developed minds, bodies and well trained souls — or moral natures as one may choose to call them. A State, the population of which consists of individuals with dwarfed souls

although they may have developed minds and bodies, can never realize her sociological possibilities until she has given them commensurate moral training. Man does not live by bread alone. He may be an intelligent animal having strong physical powers, but he can never rise to his full height until the spiritual fires have been kindled in his soul. It is only then that he rises superior to the brute creation and assumes the likeness of the God who made him.

Man is born with a measure of capacity of mind, body and soul. It is not believed by thinkers that there is any process by which these original endowments can be increased. These are the foundations upon which he is to build his life structure. To change the figure: He is given certain measures, the gallon, the peck, half bushel, and the bushel, and his moral duty is to fill them — to do less than this is culpable.

When the individual first comes into the world he is only a little, weak, ignorant animal without moral perception. He must be fed to give him strength, taught to enlighten his mind and trained to live right, which develops his moral nature. The day he arrives he matriculates in the School of Life and continues its courses until senility overtakes him. He begins as a little savage from which state some never emerge. He instinctively seeks food, but has no scruples about how he gets it or from whom he takes it. His moral perceptions and standards are derived from thinking plus the training given him and since many do little thinking, most moral standards are the products of training. It is for this reason that he should be reared in the best possible environment and receive the soundest ethical training. This being true what shall be said of a state which gives no tangible evidence of recognition of her responsibility in this matter, yet puts the individual in prison if he does not conform to accepted standards about which she has never troubled herself to teach him?

As the State is vitally interested in raising the standard of its citizenry, she must see to it that the mind must be

cultivated, the body strengthened and the moral perceptions quickened.

To develop the mind and body leaving the soul to atrophy for lack of proper training is to turn loose upon society a horde of conscienceless criminals, liars, thieves and murderers whose keen minds and strong bodies make them the more dangerous on that account.

"The crime wave" is often discussed and the fact of the rapid increase of prison population emphasized. We arrest, convict and incarcerate these social offenders, theoretically to protect society and redeem the criminals themselves. The much to be deplored fact remains that in many cases the prisoners serve their sentences and come out of prison threefold the children of hell that they were when they entered it. We fail because we begin at the wrong end. We treat effects rather than causes. Instead of adopting preventive treatment, society waits until the disease becomes incurable then in a desultory way administers its "reform" nostrums that rarely prove beneficial.

The proper time to make an effort to prevent crime, and keep the prospective criminal out of the penitentiary is while he is in the cradle or toddling around during his juvenile years. Society itself is the archcriminal in that it neglects its duty to develop the moral natures of its children. Ida Tarbell says: "We are trying to bring about things legally that can only be brought about ethically."

The only hope for improved social conditions lies in an efficient promotion of virtue and an effective discouragement of vice. The battle between these forces — the one good, the other evil — has been raging since the advent of man. They both are within the individual. All things that God made are good. The abuse of anything is bad. Excess is the sin to be overcome and ethical training is the most effective weapon that is available to the State for this purpose. It is inconceivable that vice can finally overcome virtue, that the forces of evil will eventually overcome those of Good. If this should result the Creator will have failed



in His purpose. The history of man in his ascent from savagery proves incontestably that the reverse is true. The State as the administrative agency of society is under impelling obligation to exert her powers to the utmost to assist each individual in the combat within him between these opposing tendencies. What greater or more effective service can the State render than to give the individual thorough ethical training with which he can overcome the destructive forces of Evil and enjoy the blessings that the Good will bring him. This done and an enlightened public opinion, — the sovereign ruler in every State — will bring into existence a State that will promote the well being of all.

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It may be said by some that the foregoing suggestions if put into practical operation would make religion a subject for State interference and control. In order to forestall such erroneous conclusions, it is well at this point to differentiate between Ethics and Religion; Ethics is defined as "The science of right conduct and character. The science which treats of the nature and grounds of moral obligation and of the rules which ought to determine conduct in accordance with this obligation. The doctrine of man's duty in respect to himself and the rights of others."

Religion on the other hand, is defined as "Reverence toward the gods, fear of God, piety, conscientious scrupulousness, religious awe." If one may be allowed a further definition it may be said that religion is a sixth sense common to all mankind by which the finite being seeks to find the infinite God.

Theology is defined as: "The science concerned with ascertaining, classifying, systematizing all attainable truth concerning God and His relation to the Universe. The Science of Religion."

Ethics deals with right living both as regards the individual himself and his relation to his fellows. Every social act comes under the jurisdiction of ethical social control and being of vital interest to the State there is imposed upon

her a solemn duty to train her citizens very thoroughly in the principles of right living.

It is plain then that Ethics, Religion and Theology are separate and distinct things and that the teaching of ethics and morality in no way involves any interference with either religion or theology. The failure to draw the proper distinction between them is in large measure responsible for the lack of better ethics as well as better religion. It is the imperative duty of the State to train her people to live rightly and righteously and to make their lives conform to sound morals, but one's religious faith and doctrine and his relations to his God are strictly the affair of the individual with which properly the State has nothing whatever to do.

All good people of whatever religious persuasion should be able to coöperate harmoniously in the effort to promote ethical training relating as it does to the questions of right living and correct moral conduct.

The case is different with questions involving religious faith and doctrine because equally good people may differ uncompromisingly on questions of this character — each being equally sincere that the other is wrong in his belief as to that which the other regards as absolutely essential to the future welfare and happiness of the soul, there is no common ground upon which they can get together. As between them, it is not a question of method or policy, but a fundamental difference that admits of no compromise. In Ethics there is a common objective and all methods moral in themselves are permissible.

For the above reasons it is inadvisable for the State to mix the teaching of ethics and religion, and any attempt by her to do so must of necessity result in serious harm. All who desire the promotion of the common good can and should do their part to assist in the much needed effort to regenerate the people through the establishment of better moral standards and a more general knowledge of the obligations they imply. Once inject in the movement

religious questions, the hope of success dies. Let the State hold aloft the banner of civic righteousness as she should, let her teach the principles of right living as efficiently as possible; let her preach lofty morals and elevated character for everybody, but leave the matter of religious faith and doctrine to the individual and the Church, where they properly belong.

It is for these reasons that the separation of Church and State should be scrupulously observed. The State should use every available means at her command to teach every inhabitant within her borders to observe faithfully every moral and social obligation; to love the truth, to be honest and temperate and to respect the rights of others. She should refrain from anything that involves the religious beliefs of the people. These are the peculiar responsibility of the individual and the Church. Religious faith and doctrine are no concerns of the State. She should teach ethics or the science of right living just as she teaches any other subject embraced in the curriculum and there is no more reason to call it "religious" ethics than there is to call other subjects such as mathematics, language, etc., "religious." Since there is such widespread misunderstanding and confusion of thought on the subjects of Religion and Ethics it cannot be too strongly emphasized that ethics and religion are separate and distinct things. One can be ethical and not be religious or religious and not be ethical. Ethics concerns itself only with the living present in its relation to man as a social being, and it defines the rules of human conduct. Religion on the other hand deals with the relations of the individual to God not only as they exist in the present, but as they may exist throughout eternity. While there is no organic connection between them, there should be no conflict since they both seek a common end — the betterment of man. Good ethics makes for better religion and good religion is conducive of better ethics. Harmonious coöperation each working in its own field should be the rule, and to insure this harmony the State should confine its teaching

strictly to ethics alone, leaving to religionists to teach all the religion and as much ethics as they choose. It is the imperative duty of the State to teach morals which as a social science is worthy of all the attention that may be devoted to it. The religionists would do well to teach it as an important supplement to their religious training. The line of demarcation between social science and metaphysical theology should be clearly defined and strictly observed by the State. The primary concern of the State is to develop good citizens who will obey her laws and do right one to the other, but the State has no proper function to meddle in any way with the citizen's opinions of religious faith and doctrine. In fact she cannot properly concern herself as to whether or not her citizens have any religion at all. Without free religion there can be no free State.

In the long ago, the home was the seat of moral training. The parents were the normal monitors of the children. In those times people lived at home and the fireside was the social centre. Then, the opportunities for diversion and amusement were more restricted than now. The mothers reared and trained their children instead of leaving them in charge of nurses while they spend their time at card parties, picture shows and in other forms of diversion. The family was then the manufacturers and the women and children were in large measure the operatives. The large mechanized factories have destroyed the family unit and taken the mothers, fathers and older children into the mills. The moral training that was given in the home is no longer practicable. The foregoing and the greatly increased facilities for amusement and recreation have changed the customs and habits of the people, incidentally depriving the children of the closer supervision and home training they had then. The unfortunate circumstance is that society has failed to provide any effective system of moral training to take the place of that which the evolution has destroyed. It is of vital concern to the State that something constructive be done to supply this deficiency in social organization.

The School is the only instrumentality available to the State that can be relied upon to assume and discharge this responsibility. The only practicable way out seems to be to shift the major part of the burden of moral training of children from the mothers' knees to those of the school teachers. This course seems to be a necessity from which there is no escape. This being true it is nothing less than astonishing that the State has done nothing to make a beginning in this much needed provision. The State does not have any course of moral training in its curriculum to supply that which the changes in economic methods and social customs have largely destroyed. It will be conceded that moral training is the most important of all and yet if the State had paid no more attention to mathematics than she has to ethics, there would scarcely be any of her citizens who would be able to recite correctly the multiplication table!

### WHAT IS BEING DONE

A start has been made in 25 States: California, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin.

The Florida and Idaho laws require that one-half hour and one hour per week, respectively, shall be devoted to moral instruction. In the other States mentioned, the laws appear to require instruction in morals without stipulating the amount of time to be given to the subject. Nebraska and Oregon require their respective State Superintendents of Public Instruction to prepare an outline for character instruction in public schools.

The work of developing moral training is in its incipiency. The efforts in this direction are sporadic. It is, however, an encouraging sign that here and there, widely removed from each other, the idea of moral training is

springing up, giving evidence that ethical concepts are permeating the public mind. This growing ethical consciousness will inevitably incite action in the long run. In other words the need for ethical training is progressively being recognized and while as yet no well organized method of dealing with the subject has been devised, beginnings are being made. As might be expected, the movement is as yet in a chaotic, empirical stage, but once started there are grounds for the belief that it will go forward. Anything, however, is preferable to the state of absolute inertia that has existed in the past. The growth of public sentiment for moral training, as is the case with all far-reaching, fundamental changes, will perhaps be slow at first, but once gotten under way more rapid progress will follow. Many methods will be tried out and improved upon and Experience, the greatest of all teachers, will finally point out more efficient ways of producing satisfactory results. For the moment, the first and most important thing to do is to arouse the public to an appreciation of the dire, existing need for moral training and its great importance as a means of promoting the public welfare.

The home, the Church and the State are the most important factors in the work of moral regeneration of the people. Each in its own field may do its work without in any way conflicting with that of the others.

The harvest is great and the laborers are few. The immensity of the task and the urgent need for remedial action should be impressed upon the public consciousness by every available means, the fireside chat, the message from the pulpit, the public forum, the picture show, the radio, etc., etc.

It would be a great mistake to assume that only the juvenile population needs moral training. The present moral standards leave something yet to be desired. While it is true that great progress has been made in science, literature and general diffusion of knowledge, it admits of serious doubt if the average moral standards of today are as high

as they were a half century ago. The need for improvement extends from the prattling babe to the oldest inhabitant. Once introduce an efficient system of moral training, the children themselves will become very influential and effective teachers of the grown-ups in their respective homes. Let the children become ethical minded and they will incite interest and thought in the older members of the household. The kingdom of social righteousness lies ahead and moral training is the road that leads to it. We train people to make them more efficient in their various callings. We even train animals that they may be more serviceable, but we do not make proper effort to train ourselves to live. We leave out of the picture the most important thing in it. The charge is that Virginia is not doing her part in the work of improvement of the morals of her people. She is spending millions, annually, for literary development; some, but not enough, for public health and physical well being, and enormous sums for criminal expenses, but is doing absolutely nothing to prevent the atrophy of the souls of her people. She seems unmindful of the fact it will not profit man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul.

The lack of moral training is linked up with crime in the relation of cause and effect. Criminal statistics show that 50 per cent of all prisoners received from the courts in the United States has been convicted of some form of stealing. This varies greatly in different States. Among the highest percentages are Illinois 75 per cent, Oklahoma 72, Indiana 70, Pennsylvania and Texas 69 each. Among the lowest are Rhode Island 34 per cent, Maryland 41, and Vermont 44.

The percentage in Virginia is 63.

She stands ninth in the number of prisoners per hundred thousand of population. She has more than one and one-half times as many prisoners of 15 years and over per hundred thousand of population than Rhode Island, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, South Dakota, Nebraska,

North Carolina, South Carolina, Idaho, Washington or Oregon.

She has more than double as many as Maine, Connecticut, New Jersey, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota or Utah.

She has three times as many as New Hampshire, Massachusetts or New York. She has four times as many as Pennsylvania. Maryland with 249 prisoners to the hundred thousand, has the highest number, while Pennsylvania with 27 has the lowest. Virginia has 108. The general average for the United States is 74. Since stealing is the major crime in Virginia there is evidently need of serious effort to correct the people's morals, as honesty is the bedrock of civilization.

Criminal statistics do not tell the whole story since we well know that there is a large number of people who are either potential or actual criminals who are neither caught nor convicted. Suffice it to say that there is evidence sufficient to satisfy all that the moral status of the people is such as should excite public interest not to say alarm. There should be no surprise that the "Crime Wave" is continually rising higher. The wonder is that matters are not worse than they are.

The efforts, however well intended, to reform those who have already been convicted, must continue to be discouragingly futile. It is like taking position at the foot of the precipice to gather up the maimed and broken bodies of the unfortunates who have fallen over it, when with less effort the dangerous point at the top could have been fenced off and the danger removed.

Manifestly it is the duty of society to seek out the causes of crime and remove them. In the language of the old maxim it should "Stop the beginnings." The attack should be made at the source. Destroy the seeds of crime and its weeds can not come. Crime has its origin in the motive. If the individual has instilled in him from infancy sound

ethical concepts his life will usually conform to them. Bring up the child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it is still ringing down the corridors of time as an expression of the concentrated wisdom of the ages.

The question reduces itself to this: Shall we rear a population with strong, cultured minds and sound bodies governed by moral principles or shall we rear them without moral restraint to prey upon each other like the untutored animals of the jungle. This is the crux of the matter.

It may be truthfully said that neither the family, the Church nor the State is doing its full duty in this respect hence degeneration is sapping the foundations of all three.

### THE REMEDY

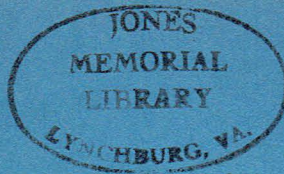
Let the responsible heads of the family take the matter to heart seriously and develop within the home a moral atmosphere by teaching the children to love truth and hate falsehood, to do right and avoid wrong, to be social minded respecting the rights of others, to have clean minds and bodies, to refrain from lying and stealing, to do unto others as they would have them do unto them, to have due regard for self interest, but not to allow it to degenerate into selfishness. Let the Church recognize that people should learn to live right on earth now as a preparation for that future life which its theology teaches. Let its ministrations and services coördinate with the ethical needs of the living present. Let it emphasize still more impressively the duty of the individual to make service to his fellow man his mission in life rather than become absorbed in the selfish desire to insure for himself a desirable place in Heaven. If possible, let it stress more strongly the idea of a love of God, truth, righteousness, and love of neighbor, right now and right here. These are in accord and in no way inconsistent with an abiding living faith that God

will take care of and make proper provision for the future. An awakened conscience must be the compelling force to be relied upon both in the individual and the Church to bring effective results.

A great social responsibility rests upon the State to develop the moral character of her people because upon this foundation her hopes of permanent success rest. Her legislators may be the wisest, her laws may be all that could be desired, but if she have an ignorant, weak and vicious population she cannot be a great State. Laws of mere affirmation or negation are powerless to bring the desired results. Improvement, if it come, must do so through a process of reaching and uplifting the individual himself. This can best be accomplished through an institution efficiently and constantly operated that will train the minds of the individuals to perceive and the hearts to love the truth, revere and apply the principles of right living.

Happily the State has an institution eminently qualified to do this work — the School. It already trains the intellect and disseminates information about physical right living. It can easily add to its curriculum a course on ethics and thereby teach good morals as efficiently as it now teaches geography, language or mathematics. The State has been remiss in this matter and should proceed at the earliest practicable time to correct her position in this regard. I suggest that the General Assembly which soon convenes enact a law making it mandatory upon the State Board of Education to include in the curriculum of every school supported in whole or in part by the State, a course in Ethics, the same to be given as much time as may be given to other subjects. This course to be put in every grade from the lowest primary grade to the highest University course. It would be well, too, to make it mandatory upon the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to supervise this work to insure its efficient performance.

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*Virginia Collection*  
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