

SANTA CLAUS.

BY THE EDITOR.

THERE seems to be a period in the evolution of the child in which it is given to believing in the personification of ideas. I know a little boy to whom Santa Claus, during a certain period of his life, was, and remained, in spite of all explanations, a real person whom he knew as well as his Papa and his Mamma. I tried to explain to him the meaning of Santa Claus. I took occasion to tell him that all the various Christmas presents were given him by his parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and friends, and that they had to buy them in the stores. In this connexion I saw fit to mention that the idea of Santa Claus was simply an allegorical expression of the love of parents and grandparents who wished to give Christmas joy to good little children.

The Christmas gifts are here; they are the realities which the children see, and on these concrete things hangs their conviction of the reality of Santa Claus.

Children are right from their standpoint, which views the reality back of an abstraction in the allegory of a personification.

When I explained to the little fellow that Santa Claus was such love of parents and others as prompts them to give to children Christmas presents, the child understood every word, and even appreciated the fact that every present must be paid for by somebody. Nevertheless, Santa Claus remained a real figure in his imagination and continued to play a most important part not only in his games but also generally in his whole world-conception, so much so that his highest ambition was to become Santa Claus himself as soon as he grew up.

A little incident will serve as an instance of how mature thoughts for a long time lie side by side with childlike conceptions. Once when the little boy asked me about details of Santa Claus's habitation and machine shops, I again gave him the explanation of

Santa Claus's ideal nature, whereupon the child said: "Yes, I know that Santa Claus means love of papas and mammas for their children, but I do not mean that kind of Santa Claus; I now mean the real Santa Claus."

The reply of the little fellow reminded me of the views of many adult children who do not as yet understand that all abstractions are real. Thus they are still in need of the method of personification to make them appear real to their mind.

There is among a certain class of educators the notion prevalent that we ought to abolish in child education all the fairy tales and with them the dear old figure of Santa Claus. But I have observed that in the absence of the traditional characters which by the experience of centuries have become typical representations of certain spiritual realities of life, children are apt to form their own personifications, which of course will be cruder, less poetical, and less defined than the old ones. While I gladly allow that the rationalising influence should watch over the development of a child by constantly keeping before his mind rational explanations of the various fairy tale figures, I should not regard it as advisable to crush or cripple the child's imagination. We need not fear that it will not be corrected in time. I have the confidence that a child will naturally overcome the childishness of fairy-tale personifications, and we need not shock his mind by suddenly disillusioning him. The child will overcome in later years the superstition of a literal acceptance of fairy tales and will preserve the poetry of the story.

It is neither necessary nor advisable to pull out the first teeth because they have no roots and will not endure. According to the laws of nature the development of the second teeth begins before the first teeth fall out. In the realm of the spiritual development, therefore, we ought not to be zealous iconoclasts; we need not pull out and violently remove that which is immature and temporary, but care ought to be taken that the germs of a higher conception be planted and that at the disappearance of the old the new and more purified thought be ready to take its place.

The little boy of whom I speak understood only in part what I told him about Santa Claus. He believed that he understood it all. He acquired an idea that parental love, and children's joys, and the family Reunion at the christmas festival were great realities in life, but he did not see that in their presence the figure of what he called the real Santa Claus as a bodily being living in the Rocky Mountains and travelling over the country in his reindeer sleigh

had become redundant—without however having lost its significance.

Is not the same true of mankind as a whole? The evolution of human civilisation has also its fairy-tale period, and we are only now emerging from its fanciful visions. There are still many among us who believe that unless the letter of a myth be true there can be neither beauty nor truth in religion. They think, like genuine adult children, that if Santa Claus were not a real definite individual there could be no Christmas presents nor any true Christmas joy. Their belief in a God and Heaven is more like the children's belief in Santa Claus than a genuine faith in the grand realities that are symbolised in these names. Heaven and hell to many are not spiritual, but material; they are conceived, not as conditions, but as places.

Thinking men among the church people of the old stamp are often struck with the truth that God and immortality are part and parcel of our life and that they are traceable everywhere in reality itself. But then, like the little boy of whom I spoke before, they understand and accept the new light, and yet stick at the same time to the materialistic view. All the Christmas presents are due to the love of parents and friends, yet in addition to it there is an individual person who provides for them, and he is the real Santa Claus. They grant that God is the eternal in the transient; the immutable law in the changes of the phenomenal world; yet in addition claim that he may be an individual being.

The conception of God is ultimately based on fact, but the notion that God is an individual being is an illusion; and if thinking people still cling to this error, it is as if a naturalist, travelling in the desert, explained to his fellow travellers the causes of a mirage, yet they, having understood the whole explanation, would add: "That may all be very true; the mirage as we see it is due to all these causes which we can plainly trace in diagrams and calculate according to the laws of the refraction of light in the different strata of the heated air, but that does not disprove the theory that there might be some real haven of peace, full of beauty and bliss, in that very same place where the mirage appears. The cosmic order may be uncreate and the condition of the wonderful harmony of the world, it may be God: yet this God might at the same time be a concrete being and as much an individual ego-consciousness as we are. Further, heaven and hell may be conditions of the soul, but there may be also a heaven that is as real and concretely material a place as this earth is;" and then they believe that the spir-

itual reality of heaven and hell, as it exists in us, would be of no avail unless there were some material reality in addition, unless they were geographical localities on our own planet or somewhere else in space. Such people have not yet outgrown the mythological phase of their development, and, after a careful consideration of their state of mind, I have come to the conclusion that they are still in need of a sensual conception of religious truths, and, as a rule, if they lost the belief in the letter, they would also lose the belief in the spirit, for their comprehension of things spiritual is as yet undeveloped.

The most important religious idea is the God-idea, and it is natural that this deep and intricate conception should cause great difficulties to the educator.

The question arises, Would it be right to teach the child those childlike conceptions of the Deity which we ourselves no longer believe; or shall we, with agnostics, tell them we do not know whether God exists or not; or, finally, shall we with freethinkers ridicule the belief as unworthy of credence?

Perhaps all these methods are somewhat faulty, and the best principle would be to let the children watch the performance of religious worship of various denominations, and when they ask about the significance of prayer, sermons, hymn-singing, thanksgivings, and benedictions, give them at first an explanation of the ideas which induce some people to go through these ceremonies and sometimes through strange rituals. If the children's interest in religious problems is aroused, tell them of other beliefs, including idolatrous practices and superstitions, which can easily be illustrated by pictures. But while imparting your information, be always careful not to present your own views ready made, but let the children work out the question for themselves. Give them such help as will render the solution of the various problems easier to them, but see to it that they do the thinking themselves.

The question will soon be asked, "Does God exist?" and of course the children's God is an invisible individual who hovers in the air as he is pictured in Bible illustrations. A God such as the children believe in, of course, does not exist, but for that reason it would be very wrong to tell the child, "No, God does not exist;" for while the child's idea of God is wrong, there are notions connected with it which are true. The child asks also whether or not there is an invisible presence that watches him, whether or not his acts when he is alone remain concealed from the world, and here the difficulty appears to lay the foundation for a higher con-

ception of God than is the popular view of the traditional personification.

Meet the question, "Does God exist?" by the counter question, "What do you understand by God?" and thus lead the child to a description of its childlike views, which will give you a chance to point out the true and to discard the false.

A little chap of scarcely three years was once quite shocked when he heard that the air above us grew thinner and thinner and that at last there was no air left. No one can breathe there and we should, if carried up, immediately die. The source of his anxiety became apparent when with suppressed tears he exclaimed in a state of tension, "But, then the Good Lord must die?" "No, my boy," I said, "the Good Lord cannot die; He has not a body as we have; He has no lungs; He need not breathe in order to exist. His existence does not depend on a body like ours. He is not an individual as you are and as I am. If He were, He would not be God. He is not a man. He is God." The child felt greatly relieved and it helped him to come a step nearer to the truth.

Such occasional explanations should as a rule come only in response to questions, for then, and then alone, will they be appreciated. Religious instruction should consist mainly in setting the child's mind to thinking and solving the problems that the child perceives himself. He will ask, "What does God want us to do?" which means for adult people, "What significance does the God-idea possess in human life?" And when the child answers this question in the child's language, that "God wants us to be good," he will naturally come to the definition that "God is all that prompts to goodness."

We can fairly abstain here from entering into further details because the individuality of the child will require much individualising on this most important subject. All I would claim, however, is this, that a child—especially if his other education has been in lines analogous to those pointed out here—can be made to see (1) that God is present in everything that is good, (2) that God is the principle of goodness, (3) that this God is not an individual being but an eternal and ubiquitous presence; (4) that this God is everywhere, and not nowhere, that although He is not a material body, he is a most effective reality and not a nonentity; that he is not only good, but that His goodness includes that He is also formidable, as his goodness implies that badness leads to badness and the sequence of sin is sin's curse. And lastly, that, be we ever so much alone, we yet always remain in the presence of God. All our actions

persist in their effects, and we can nowhere and under no circumstances escape the results of our acts.

Children can be led up to these results and easily made to understand them without our entering into deep philosophical discussions. At the same time the corollaries of these views can be pointed out. Children that grow up under these impressions will remain reverent without being superstitious. They will naturally understand the right use of prayer. They will not pray for a change of weather, but for strength of heart; and although they may have been brought up to say grace before dinner, they will not pray with any expectation of changing the will of God. Their prayer will be a realisation of self-control; it will be self-criticism exercised by suffering their acts to pass by in the review of a searching self-examination and will result in self-discipline, rendering them determined to pursue the right way of action.

It will be advisable on general principles to let children know at an early age that, as there are different nations, so there are different religions; and we must always be careful not to misrepresent others. We may say why we do not share other people's views, but do not pronounce any condemnation without good and sufficient reasons. A comparison between different religions will be very serviceable in educating the child's independent judgment.

The right God-conception renders us more efficient in life; it makes us independent and energetic. The wrong God-conception makes us superstitious and dependent. It is said that during the naval engagement of the Chinese-Japanese war the commander of one of the great Chinese vessels went down into his cabin to pray for help to his Joss, when he ought to have been on the captain's bridge looking out for the enemy and commanding his men. There is no use in praying when we ought to act. He who believes that prayer can work miracles, and trusts that God will at his special request change the course of nature, deserves to go to the wall; for the highest prayer, nay, the only true prayer, is to attend to the right thing at the right time—in a word, to do one's duty.

You need not make atheists of your children nor creed-duped believers. Teach them the facts of life, point out the path of right conduct; make them critical and thoughtful without treating the errors of others in a cynical spirit, and you can safely leave the rest of their religious development to their own judgment.