Let the Children Come: The Religion of the Protestant Child in Early America[1]

E. Brooks Holifield

In 1844, the Congregationalist minister Enoch Pond in Bangor, Maine, reminded his fellow clergy that they had been commissioned not only to feed the sheep of their flocks but also to nurture the lambs. Under no circumstances, he cautioned, would a good minister neglect the children, for both Christian parents and their pastors felt "the deepest anxiety" that the children of American parishes would not "receive that wise government, that faithful discipline, that Christian instruction and restraint, which, by the blessing of God, shall result in their speedy conversion, and bring them early and truly into the fold of Christ." He called for pastors to pray for the children, to convene meetings of praying parents, to pay attention to children during pastoral visits, to impart special instruction to children from the pulpit, to visit their schools, to institute Sunday schools, to teach children the Bible, and to offer catechetical instruction. The devoted pastor would acquaint himself with children, "enter into their feelings, and interest himself in their affairs; and thus engage their affections, and win their confidence."[2]

Christian clergy in America had long heeded such admonitions. Seventeenth-century Puritan ministers made serious, if sporadic, efforts to teach the catechism, often invited groups of children into their homes for instruction, contended over the implications of the baptismal covenant, and urged parents to teach their offspring religious truths and Christian practices. Eighteenth-century Anglican clergy made similar efforts to instruct children, and their revivalist counterparts in New England and the Middle Colonies encouraged the con-

1. I wrote this essay as a Senior Fellow in the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University as part of a seminar on "The Child in Law, Religion, and Society," and my research received support through a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. My conclusions about these matters do not necessarily reflect either the views of the Center or of the Pew Charitable Trusts.

2. Enoch Pond, *The Young Pastor's Guide: Or Lectures on Pastoral Duties* (Bangor, Maine: E. F. Duren, 1844), 216, 217, 221, 225–26.

E. Brooks Holifield is the Charles Howard Candler professor of American Church History at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

© 2007, The American Society of Church History
Church History 76:4 (December 2007)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

version of children at younger than customary ages. Jonathan Edwards devoted careful attention to his four-year-old convert Phebe Bartlet, who followed in the path of her converted eleven-year-old brother by announcing, after anguished prayers and cries for mercy, that "the kingdom of God had come" to her. Nineteenth-century pastors transformed the Sunday school from an academy for the poor into a nursery for children's religious growth; the tract societies abounded in a new children's literature designed to encourage pious feeling; and nineteenth-century theologians debated vigorously both about the guilt or innocence of children and about the appropriate form of religious nurture for the young.[3]

Historians of American religion have provided rich studies of adult attitudes toward children and childhood religion. They have revealed the effects of parental concerns on seventeenth-century religious practice, explored the consequences of religious conviction for childrearing, analyzed the formation of the Sunday school, studied the use of the catechism, and examined the theological debates about childhood in nineteenth-century Protestant culture. They have demonstrated that most nineteenth-century Christian clergy and parents fully agreed with Enoch Pond's conviction that children needed to hear of "their own special, indispensable obligations early and entirely to consecrate themselves to the service of their God and Redeemer."[4]

But what did the children think? How did they view the sermons, catechetical classes, and Sunday school sessions? What religious themes drew their attention and formed their religious convictions? Studies of lived religion in early America have shown that laypeople often had distinctive religious interests, not necessarily opposed to the theological themes of the clergy but adapted to their own fears, hopes, and preoccupations. The journal of the seventeenth-century Puritan layman Samuel Sewall has grounded a plausible judgment that a yearning for protection, for himself and his family, formed for him,

3. Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1742), *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4: *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 200, 201–05; see Catherine A. Brekus, "Children of Wrath, Children of Grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan Culture of Child Rearing," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 300–28.

4. Margaret Bendroth, "Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*," in *Child in Christian Thought*, 350–64; Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, "Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Early New England," *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41–68; Philip J. Greven, *The Protestant Temperament* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); Bruce Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002); Pond, *Young Pastor's Guide*, 219.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and by implication for other laypeople in New England, "the substance of religion." Letters from Christian immigrants to America suggest that for them belief in a protective God, a religious view of suffering, and a hope for an afterlife as a place of reunion constituted the core of religious faith. The recovery of the thoughts and words of children offers further opportunity to understand religion in early American culture.[5]

This study examines the diaries and letters of forty-four children between the ages of nine and sixteen who lived between 1770 and 1861. No unitary principle governed their selection; the choice of documents—forty diaries and four sets of letters—depended on chance discovery. This is no systematic random sample that can produce large generalizations, and it does not reveal whether the percentage of children seriously engaged in religious matters was increasing, declining, or stable during this period, but it can suggest some patterns in children's religious experience. It is heavily weighted toward girls, perhaps by chance but probably because early American girls kept diaries and journals more often than boys. Girls wrote thirty-nine of the forty-four documents, twenty-two of which came from children aged fifteen to sixteen, nine from thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, eleven from children aged ten to twelve, and two from nine-year-olds. They come primarily from children of the middle or upper classes, though a few come from poorer quarters. All of the children were white and all were English-speaking, so the diaries do not capture the experience of the African American child or of German or Norwegian immigrant children. All were Protestant—they included Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, and Quakers. Some of the diaries—and most of the letters—provide only a snapshot glimpse of a meditative moment. Most of the diaries, however, continue for a year or longer. None of them comes from reminiscing adults; they reveal, rather, what children thought and felt when they were still children.

5. David D. Hall, "The Mental World of Samuel Sewall," *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 214; Jay Dolan, "The Immigrants and their Gods: A New Perspective in American Religious History," *Church History* 57:1 (1988): 61–72. My essay stands in a developing field of scholarship on children that found a new impetus with the publication of Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien Régime* (Paris: Librarie Plon, 1960). Subsequent work included important studies by Hugh Cunningham, Linda Pollock, Barbara Hanawalt, James A. Schultz, Karen Calvert, Shulamith Shahar, Joseph M. Hawes, N. Ray Hiner, Robert Coles, and David Heller. For a helpful discussion of this scholarship insofar as it deals with religion, see Marcia J. Bunge, "Introduction," *Child in Christian Thought*, 1–28. My aim is to break new ground by focusing on documents produced by the children themselves.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The diaries display a wide variety of themes, but two motifs dominate. These children thought often about death and about the living of a good life. The encounter with death—either the anticipation of their own deaths or the experience of the deaths of others—led them to wonder and reflect about heaven and hell. Their religion bore—not invariably but almost always—an otherworldly aura. Their concern for a life of goodness, however, counterbalanced the otherworldliness. Their religion encouraged an earnest striving for virtue, and it also led close to 20 percent of the children to question the justice of the world around them. They absorbed Christian teaching through an array of religious practices, but the diaries reveal, above all, a remarkable attention to sermons. The children mentioned sermons more than three times as often as they referred to catechisms, Sunday schools, or children's literature—and they sometimes included in their diaries precise descriptions of a sermon's text and substance. As a result, ministers appeared as respected authorities, though the children never hesitated to criticize them. And finally, the diaries display, time after time, the decisive importance of relationships, especially with friends, though also with family members and religious leaders. The children shared with friends and families their hopes and fears about death, salvation, and the living of a good life.

I. Development and Diversity

Nine-year-olds did not see the world—or conceive of religion—in the same way as sixteen-year-olds. The diaries display some of the patterns of religious and cognitive development that have become familiar to modern readers. For nine-year-old Elizabeth Payson in Portland, Maine, in 1828, it was a matter of religious interest when her brother asked his mother if "this world would be all burnt up when we are dead": "And all the dishes too? Will they melt like lead? And will the ground be burnt up too?" A similar sensibility informed the imagination of Susan Eppes in Georgia, who heard stories of abolitionists and dreamed that they were chasing her, looking like "the devil as uncle Aleck describes him with horns and cloven feet." For ten-year-old Catherine Havens in New York, going to church meant receiving sugarplums from the "nice gentleman" who sat in front of them, hearing the bees buzzing, smelling the lilac bush outside the window, and counting bonnets "when the sermon is very long." And for ten-year-old Caroline Clarke, religion meant trying to be good, reciting the catechism, and reading the Bible, along with stories about pious children: "I don't see how they happened to be so awfully good. Anna says they died of 'early piety,' but she did not say it very loud."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The ten-year-olds worried about bad behavior, took pride in verses memorized, delighted in stories about missionaries, and confessed to their diaries that they could not understand the ministers' sermons.[6]

By the time the children were twelve, however, they displayed a capacity to absorb copious amounts of religious teaching. In 1770, the parents of Anna Green Winslow, living in Nova Scotia, sent their daughter to Boston to live with her aunt and to be "finished" at Boston schools. Anna began her diary in 1771 when she was twelve, and it reveals a precocious child enchanted by pretty clothes and merry parties but also eager for parental approval and strikingly attentive to the religious teaching of her mentors. She carefully noted the texts of sermons and attempted to restate the message in her own words: "Mr. Beacon's text yesterday was Psalms cxlix.4 . . . His doctrine was something like this, viz., that the salvation of Gods people mainly consists in Holiness. The name Jesus signifies a Savior. Jesus saves his people from their sin." She observed that Beacon had defined beauty as holiness and had informed the young people that they would "never be truly beautifull" until they were "like the King's daughter, all glorious within." He ended by warning them, at the risk of sounding "cource" to their "delicacy," that while they remained without holiness they were "defil'd, ugly, and loathsome to all holy beings," and that God's wrath would overtake them, and that if they died in this condition they would be "turn'd into hell, with ugly devils, to eternity." Anna summarized the sermon without comment.[7]

She noted sermon after sermon, sometimes recording their doctrines and their prejudices. Mr. Hunt assured the congregation that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Dr. Chauncey preached three sermons on Acts 2:42. Mr. Hunt preached from Isaiah 41, explaining that "human nature is as opposite to God as darkness to light" and that "our sin is only bounded by the narrowness of our capacity." Mr. Beacon used Romans 4:6 to inform the congregation that "before we all sinned in Adam, our father, Christ loved us. He said that the Son of God always did as his father gave him command-

6. George L. Prentiss, *The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Prentiss* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1882), 13; "Diary of Susan Bradford Eppes," in Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years* (Macon, Ga.: J. W. Burke, 1926), 64; Catherine Elizabeth Havens, "Diary of Catherine Elizabeth Havens," in *Diary of a Little Girl in Old New York* (New York: Henry Collins, Brown, 1919), 36, 66; Caroline Cowles Richard Clarke, "Diary of Caroline Cowles Clark," in *Village Life in America 1852–1872* (New York: Henry Holt, 1913), 5, 10, 30, 37, 39; Louisa May Alcott, "Diary of Louisa May Alcott," in Clara Endicott Sears, ed., *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 108.

7. Alice Morse Earle, ed., *Diary of Anna Green Winslow: A Boston School Girl of 1771* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), 1, 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ment, and to prove this he said that above 17 hundred years ago he left the bosom of the Father, and came and took up his abode with men, and bore all the scourgings and buffetings which the vile Jews inflicted on him, and then he was hung upon the accursed tree—he died, was buried, and in three days rose again, and there took his seat at the right hand of the Mighty on high from whence he will come to be the supreame and impartial judge of quick and dead." This is part of the "wrighteousness," she added, "for the sake of which a sinner is justified." Only on rare occasions did her perseverance flag: when Mr. Thacher preached on Hebrews 11:3, she insisted that she remembered "a great deal of the sermon" but had not "the time to put it down."[8]

The doctrine she took from the sermons seemed elementary in comparison to the reports she made of catechetical lectures. Each Wednesday evening she and her aunt attended the catechism classes of the Boston preachers "at the house of Mrs. Rogers in School Street." Anna faithfully recorded the content of the lectures. She learned "how to glorify God," and how to use the scriptures as a "rule." She absorbed some of the traditional arguments for the divine authority of the Bible. "I did not understand all he said about the external and internal evidence," she conceded, but she learned that the providential preservation of scripture, the persuasiveness of the biblical narrative, and the harmony of the Bible with the longings of the heart all provided evidence of its authenticity. She heard Mr. Hunt's lectures on the Trinity and knew at least that he was attempting "to prove the divinity of the Son & holy Ghost & their equality with the Father." She felt that she had a good grasp of the doctrine of predestination and the decrees of God, and she set down the arguments on paper, but her aunt told her that "a Miss of 12 years cant possibly do justice to the nicest subject in Divinity," and that she had "better not attempt a repetition of particulars."[9]

Anna Green was learning religious doctrines, but she was not ready to internalize them, to worry about her own sinfulness, to engage in the exercises of private prayer and internal devotion that marked the older children. She was recording the teachings of adults she admired, unquestioning in her confidence in them yet keeping their dogmas at a safe distance. Taught that all human creatures were proud and sinful, she preferred to think of herself as "a good girl," a "very good girl," because her uncle and aunt assured her that she was. In a similar manner, young Julia Cowles of Connecticut could read *Reflections on Death*—a gift from a friend—and find it "very interesting as well as

8. Ibid., 4, 14, 15, 26, 51.
9. Ibid., 24, 25, 48, 56.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

instructive," but she considered it simply "good advice," not a frightening portent of mortality.[10]

Yet some twelve-year-olds had already begun the arduous introspection that could define the religious life for a pious Protestant child. Twelve-year-old Sarah Judson, a Baptist child in New Hampshire in 1820, knew that she was "sinful" and "unworthy," and she brooded about "the shortness of time, the certainty of death, the value of the soul, and the terrors of the Day of Judgment," reducing her younger sister to tears by warning her of her "dangerous state." The Quaker Phebe Irish, who grew up in Yorktown, New York, in the 1850s, had lost her mother, and she meditated on death as a "destroyer," on "the realms of eternal bliss," and on "the goodness of that almighty Being whose words are perfect." To her these were not merely interesting ideas but conceptions of unseen worlds that helped form her sense of who she was, what she had to fear, and what she might hope for.[11]

By the time the children who wrote these diaries reached the age of fourteen, most of them had learned to inhabit their inner worlds. In 1773, for example, Martha Laurens, the daughter of a wealthy planter and politician in South Carolina, resolved to devote herself to "the service of that great and good God" who, in "infinite Compassion," had enabled her to see the "folly" of her ways and "by faith to lay hold on a dear Redeemer." Feeling herself a "sinful worm" before the "majestic presence" of God, she acknowledged her "shame and confusion" as a "prodigal daughter" and covenanted with God to promote the divine honor and glory. She confessed to God that she might "repine," but she asked for strength to submit to the divine will, to bear God's "most afflictive dispensations," submitting her will to a higher will. She sought to be transformed into the divine image, to be fashioned "to the resemblance of Jesus," whom she would acknowledge as her teacher, intercessor, sacrifice, and Lord. Intensely aware of her mortality, she asked only that God would grant to his "dying child" strength, confidence, and support. Within two years she re-

10. Ibid., 41; Julia Cowles, "Diary of Julia Cowles," in Laura Moseley Hadley, ed., *The Diaries of Julia Cowles: A Connecticut Record, 1797–1803* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1931), 32.

11. Emily E. C. Judson, *Memoir of Sarah B. Judson* (Cincinnati, Ohio: L. Colby, 1849), 19–20; Phebe M. Halleck Irish, *Diary and Letters of Phebe M. Irish* (Philadelphia: T. W. Stuckey, 1876), 35; see also Cornelia H. B. Richards, *Cousin Alice: A Memoir of Alice B. Haven* (New York: D. Appleton, 1868), 30; Anna Bronson Alcott, "Diary of Anna Bronson Alcott," *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands*, 87.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

newed her covenant, sorrowful that she had "shamefully fallen" but trusting in "the unbounded and astonishing measures" of God's grace.[12]

In a similar manner, fourteen-year-old Harriet Beecher, daughter of an eminent Connecticut Congregationalist minister, told her brother Edward that her whole life was "one continued struggle." She yielded to temptation almost as soon as it assailed her, fell prey to a pride that gave her nothing but unhappiness, and floated on a sea of "evanescent feelings" that made her inner life unpredictable and painful. She found relief only when one of her father's sermons—free of his usual "hair-splitting distinctions and dialectic subtleties"—let her glimpse a compassionate Christ who was patient with her errors and forgiving of her weakness. Destined to become—as Harriet Beecher Stowe—one of her era's most eminent novelists, she experienced at an early age the introspective anguish that would also mark the inner life of some of her most memorable characters.[13]

The diaries remind us, therefore, that these children could use the same language in different ways as they grew older, and they remind us, as well, of other distinctions. The diary of fifteen-year-old Virginia Hoffman in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1849, resonated with the accents of her Episcopal tradition. The seasons of the liturgical year prompted many of her reflections: Ash Wednesday made her aware that "pride and selfishness" were the two sins against which she must pray; Lent made her wonder if she had "ceased striving to be holy"; Passion Week reminded her to study the four Gospels; and Whitsunday produced meditation on "the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church of old." Thirteen-year-old Louisa May Alcott and her sister Anna, daughters of the transcendentalist educator Bronson Alcott, however, found in the "quiet and beautiful" calmness of Fruitlands, their family's small utopian community, the setting for a piety rich in perceptions of the natural world. Anna Alcott, twelve years old, discovered that the shining sun and the singing of birds in the high trees were "so beautiful it seemed as if God were near." Louisa May Alcott wrote of running through a dark forest and emerging suddenly into the sunlight:

> It seemed like going through a dark life or grave into heaven beyond. A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there, with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never

12. David Ramsay, ed., *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1845; 1st ed., 1811), 27, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34.
13. Annie Fields, ed., *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), 50–53.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life.

Some of the children used the austere vocabulary of Calvinist theology while others displayed the fervor of Methodist immediacy; some found a sense of release through the ecstasy of the nineteenth-century revivals while others spoke more often of the beauty of the sacrament. Despite their uniformly Protestant character, the diaries present no homogeneous piety. Yet the children learned their faith through a common and familiar set of religious practices, and they repeated themes that migrated from one tradition to another. The diversity had limits.[14]

II. The Practices of Piety

Almost all the children attended worship services in the church, and 60 percent of the diaries contained substantial commentary on church attendance. Early American church attendance was no lighthearted matter. Normally it meant spending the larger part of Sunday in prayer, singing, scripture reading, and listening to sermons that could last from one to two hours, or for a Quaker child like Phebe Irish the day could be spent in virtual silence: "We attended meeting today," she wrote in 1859. "It was nearly silent. One earnest voice spoke a few words of comfort, urging us all forward in the straight path of the meek and lowly Jesus." The children who attended were usually present "all day," "in the morning and evening," though it was not uncommon for them to attend only one of the two extended services. They did not uniformly find the proceedings pleasant: sixteen-year-old Charlotte Sheldon in Litchfield, Connecticut, "attended meeting all day" on July 6, 1796, and concluded that she "wasn't very much edified." But other children recorded the experience with a sense of awe and even anticipation. Young Henry Ward Beecher told his sister that he, like her, felt while "in meeting" that he "should never cease serving Christ and could run with patience the race which is set before me." Chloe Conant, a sixteen-year-old school teacher on the Pennsylvania frontier, felt bitterly disappointed when she could not attend—"I anticipated much in going"—but thought that she deserved to have her "hopes blasted" because she had thought too much about dress and friends and too little about "hearing for my life the word of the Gospel."[15]

14. George D. Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1859), 43–44, 45, 47; Anna Bronson Alcott, "Diary," 87; Louisa May Alcott, "Diary," 33.

15. Phebe Irish, "Diary," 32; Mary E. Willard, "Diary of Mary E. Willard," in *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman* (Chicago: Women's Temperance Publi-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For most American Protestants, the centerpiece of worship was the sermon, and the diaries mentioned sermons more than any other single public religious practice. Like Anna Winslow Green, children learned early to recall the text and try to remember the main points, or "heads." Twenty-one of the forty-four children made this effort, though not always with success. Ten-year-old Caroline Clarke could recall that Mr. Kendall preached from Job 26:14—"Lo these are parts of his ways, but how little portion is heard of him"—but she "could not make out what he meant." She understood, however, when the minister addressed the children, as when Mr. Tousley told them "how many steps it took to be bad": "I think he said lying was first, then disobedience to parents, breaking the Sabbath, swearing, stealing, drunkenness. I don't remember the order they came in. It was very interesting for he told lots of stories and we sang a great many times." Eleven-year-old Robert Bishop in Oxford, Ohio, had his own difficulties: "Mister Steuart preach. I forget what his subjeck was." Two of the diaries recorded incidents in which the pastor admonished children for talking among themselves. "I will suspend my remarks," announced the imposing Lyman Beecher, "until these young gentlemen have finished their conversation."[16]

The older children could be blunt: "very poor sermon," "two very indifferent sermons," "cruel," "a little hard . . . and too pointed." Yet children often found the sermons "good," "remarkably good," even "excellent" and "deeply affecting." Twelve-year-old Eleanor Agnes Lee, an Episcopalian from Virginia, heard the diocesan bishop, John Johns, preach in 1853: "I don't think I ever heard such a sermon before. I was almost breathless. The text was '& Simon Peter answered him, Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.' I remember almost every word of it. It was an invitation to come to Christ. I solemnly dedicated myself to God & I have tried, but oh! I don't think I have improved in the least, there is so much to try me. I do wish I was a Christian! But it is so hard to be one." The most frequent sermon references in the diaries merely recorded the text on

cations Association, 1889), 106; Charlotte Sheldon, "Diary of Charlotte Sheldon," *Chronicles of a Pioneer School from 1792 to 1833*, by Emily N. Vanderpoel and Elizabeth C. B. Buel (Cambridge, Mass.: University Press, 1903), 11, 12, 14; William C. Beecher and Samuel Scoville, *A Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1888), 102; Chloe B. Conant Bierce, *Journal and Biographical Notice of Chloe B. Conant Bierce* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Elm Street Printing, 1869), 42. See also Catharine Seely, *Memoir of Catharine Seely, Late of Darien Connecticut* (New York: Collins and Brother, 1843), 14.

16. Clarke, "Diary," 5, 37; John Weatherford, ed., "School and Other Days, 1859: Selections from the Diaries of Robert and Sylvester Bishop," *Ohio Historical Quarterly* 70:1 (1961): 62; Catherine Cebra Webb, "Diary of Catherine Cebra Webb," in *Chronicle of a Pioneer School*, 149.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which the minister had preached, but on occasion a child found a sermon to be life-changing: Anna Smith, sixteen years old, feared the scorn of her friends if she joined the church, so she attended services "with a thoughtless manner," but the sermon proved to be disconcerting: "It seemed as if every word of that discourse was for me alone," she wrote, and she left the service as a "deeply convicted sinner." Her family ridiculed her, but she later joined the church.[17]

The prominence of the sermon in the diaries suggests the authoritative position of the minister in the lives of these children. Almost half the children wrote something about their ministers, even if only to note who had preached that day. The theologian Enoch Pond complained that too many people in early American society treated children as "little more than ciphers in the world—as beings of but little consequence." Whatever the accuracy of the observation, children liked to be noticed, and when "Mr. Beecher visited the school," or when Mr. Newton "pressed the boys to the study of the Bible," or when Anna Smith found in Mr. Woodhull a "faithful friend" to whom she could confide both "temporal and spiritual sorrows," the children considered it sufficiently important to record. Anna Green Winslow loved to have the pastor visit, and she felt excitement every time he took "much notice" of her: "I think I like him better every time I see him." For the Quaker Charlotte Forten Grimké, it was the printed anti-slavery sermons of Theodore Parker, O. B. Frothingham, and Albert Barnes that made the ministry impressive; for others, it was a shared sense of evangelistic ambition: Chloe Conant wished that "four or five Gospel ministers" could come to her isolated community. They could, she thought, change everything for the better.[18]

Fewer children—only six of forty-four—mentioned the catechism, which had typically been the primary means by which the American child learned the rudiments of the religious life. Ever since the seventeenth century, American pastors—and often families—had used the catechism, designed for easy memorization, to convey religious doctrine to both children and adults. By the mid-nineteenth century,

17. Eleanor Agnes Lee, "Diary of Eleanor Agnes Lee," *Growing Up in the 1850s: The Journal of Agnes Lee*, ed. Mary Custis Lee (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 9, 18, 31; Sheldon, "Diary," 16, 17; Anna Maria Smith, "Diary, 1827–28," in *Women and Religion in America: Volume 1, The Nineteenth Century*, 3 vols., ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 1:16, 17; Cowles, *Diaries*, 34.

18. Pond, *Young Pastor's Guide*, 220; Caroline Chester, "Diary of Caroline Chester," *Chronicles of a Pioneer School*, 151; Beecher and Scoville, *Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, 100; Smith, "Diary," 18; Earle, ed., *Diary of Anna Green Winslow*, 4; Charlotte L. Forten Grimké, "Diary of Charlotte L. Forten Grimké," in *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten*, ed. Ray Allen Billington (New York: Dryden, 1953), 38; Conant Bierce, *Journal*, 27.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

catechetical instruction was fading into the background in a few of the denominations, but for some children it continued to have much the same importance it had for Anna Green in eighteenth-century Boston. Nine-year-old Elizabeth Payson wanted to study "a little catechism which Miss Martin has got," but the teacher said that she "could not learn it" yet. In 1853, however, Caroline Clarke recited the catechism to her grandmother every week: "Grandmother knows all the questions by heart, so she lets the book lie in her lap and she asks them with her eyes shut." Harriet Beecher's aunt, staunch Episcopalian that she was, tried to teach her niece both the Anglican catechism and the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly, and Harriet learned to recite the Anglican book with "gravity and steadfastness," though the aunt finally decided, to Harriet's relief, that two catechisms might be too many.[19]

Eight of the diaries talked about the Sunday school, a relatively new institution that began only in the 1820s to alter its character in order to teach religion to the children of church-going families rather than reading and writing to the children of the poor. Memory work formed much of the pedagogy of the early Sunday schools: Caroline Clarke learned seven biblical verses every week; her sister Anna learned passages from the *New England Primer*: "In Adam's fall we sinned all," "Zaccheus he, did climb a tree, his Lord to see." Someone in Anna's class responded to her recitation with a counter-rhyme: "The tree broke down and let him fall, and he did not see his Lord at all," but their grandmother said that the reply was "wicked indeed," and she "hoped Anna would try and forget it." For Henry Ward Beecher, Sabbath school meant Bible classes, which he found "very interesting indeed." Mr. Newton, he wrote, "commenced the New Testament and is going through it in course. The boys generally are very much pleased with the lecture."[20]

Sunday schools made wide use of children's religious literature, and they also experimented with new forms of teaching. Caroline Clarke read "Cheap Repository Tracts" by the English evangelical Hannah Moore, preparing for Sunday school in the same way she prepared for school classes, which taught mainly with oral recitation. But Sunday schools also sponsored festivals and parties, and they made use of other teaching aids designed to attract the interest of

19. Prentiss, *Life and Letters*, 12; Clarke, "Diary," 17; Fields, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 17; Weatherford, ed., "School and Other Days," 58.

20. Clarke, "Diary," 11, 17; Prentiss, *Life and Letters*, 12; Philippa C. Bush, *Memoir of Anne Gorham Everett, with Extracts from her Correspondence and Journal* (Boston: privately published, 1857), 18; Beecher and Scoville, *Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*, 99.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

children. Caroline Clarke was excited when a minister "brought an exhibition of a tabernacle just like the children of Israel carried with them to the Promised Land." Earnest Sunday school teachers, moreover, sometimes took such an interest in the children that they visited them in their homes. Clarke's teacher came to her house to "talk and pray with me on the subject of religion," prompting her younger sister to worry that "Mrs. Taylor must want me to become a missionary." Caroline assured her that she would not.[21]

Reading, both of pious literature and of the Bible, drew attention in nineteen of the diaries, almost as many as mentioned sermons. "What blessings are bestowed on me that I have the pleasure of reading good books, and have so good an education as to read intelligently," wrote Chloe Conant in 1819. Her reading of *The Writings of Miss Fanny Woodbury* left her discontented with herself: "It makes me shrink into nothing to see how devoted she lived to her covenant God and Father, and still she complained of her stupid heart and her inclination to sin. If she complained, what must I say?" The children read literature ranging in quality from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1580) to Jacob Abbott's *Young Christian* and Samuel Prime's *Elizabeth Thornton or the Flower and Fruit of Female Piety*. Twelve-year-old Anne Gorham Everett in Boston recited to her father in Italian the first canto of Tasso's poem. Religious periodicals also found young readers: Phebe Irish's reading of the *Friends' Intelligencer* caused her to "meditate on the misery of mankind."[22]

The main text, however, was the Bible, which several of the children read diligently. Sixteen of them wrote about biblical reading, which could range from devotional meditation to an elementary form of historical criticism. Elizabeth Clarke read, for devotional purposes, three chapters every weekday morning and five on Sunday. Mary Anne Bacon arose every morning at six and read two or three chapters. When Julia Cowles could not attend church services one Sabbath morning, she atoned by reading through the book of Revelation. Twelve-year-old Ellen Lyman in Boston found the second chapter of Matthew both "beautiful" and disturbing: "I am determined," she said after reading it, "to try to be kind, and gentle, and obedient, and obliging." Henry Ward Beecher read, however, by "comparing the evangelists together, and looking up the passages in the Old which

21. Clarke, "Diary," 21, 22, 70; Bush, *Memoir of Anne Gorham Everett*, 18.
22. Conant Bierce, *Diary*, 33; Bush, *Memoir of Anne Gorham Everett*, 41; A. C. Kendrick, ed., *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Emily C. Judson* (New York: Sheldon, 1860), 18; Clarke, "Diary," 28; Lee, "Diary," 21; Bush, *Memoir of Anne Gorham Everett*, 21; Irish, "Diary," 17.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are referred to in the New Testament," and he and his brother Charles exchanged letters attempting to explain difficult passages to each other. In a similar manner, Virginia Hoffman, fifteen years old, used Passion Week as an opportunity to begin a "comparison of the four Gospels." She "read and re-read" the narratives, along with a "harmony of the Gospels"—a book that attempted to reconcile the differences among them—and she found the exercise "deeply interesting."[23]

They read and they prayed. Sixteen of the documents contained reports of prayer, either solitary or communal, sometimes with family and friends. Prayer was no casual option. It was a "duty," and children worried if they neglected it. Rarely did they pray for material goods or success. Their most desperate prayers came when loved ones lay dying. They prayed for their recovery, but they also prayed for the strength to submit. Or they prayed for obedient hearts, for the religious well-being of friends, for the gift of grace, and for closer communion with God. Harriet Beecher wrote her brother Edward: "I wish I could describe to you how I feel when I pray. I feel that I love God—that is, that I love Christ—that I find comfort and happiness in it, and yet it is not the kind of comfort which would arise from free communication of my wants and sorrows to a friend. . . . Do you think, my dear brother, that there is such a thing as so realizing the presence and character of God, that He can supply the place of earthly friends? I really wish to know what you think of this."[24]

These children lived in an era of intense revivalism, and one of them recorded the excitement in her community when the celebrated revivalist Charles Finney preached there: "Some people say he is the greatest minister in the world." Only four of the diaries, however, record children's experience with organized revival services. Twelve-year-old Emily Judson, who worked in a factory twelve hours a day, surrounded by "noise and filth" and suffering from "bleeding hands and aching feet, and a very sad heart," attended in February of 1830 first a Methodist, then a Baptist, and then a Presbyterian revival, seeking some form of comfort. When her sister Harriet underwent conversion, Emily felt "broken hearted" that she could not honestly

23. Clarke, "Diary," 12; Mary Ann Bacon, "Mary Ann Bacon's Journal, Written in the 15th Year of her Age," in *Chronicles of a Pioneer School*, 68; Cowles, *Diaries*, 31; Ellen Bancroft Lyman, "Diary of Ellen Bancroft Lyman," in Arthur T. Lyman, *Arthur Theodore Lyman and Ella Lyman: Letters and Journals*, 2 vols. (Mehashe, Wis.: George Banta, 1932), 1:243; Beecher and Scoville, *Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, 100; Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman*, 45.

24. Robert G. Armstrong, ed., *Memoir of Hannah Hobie* (New York: American Tract Society, 1837), 12; Ramsay, *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 42; Smith, "Diary," 17; Fields, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 61.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

say that God had transformed her own will. For sixteen-year-old Hannah Bunting, however, a Methodist camp meeting brought a sense of release. She had felt prejudice against camp meetings, feeling that they generated only "confusion and enthusiasm," but when she finally attended one on September 25, 1818, she found herself on her knees, suffering an "internal anguish too great to bear" for many hours, until finally "at two o'clock in the morning the Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings, my dungeon shook, my chains fell off, and I cried, 'Glory to God.'" For Ella Thomas, fourteen and a student at Wesleyan College in Georgia, the revival was a group experience that drew her into unity with other students from whom she had first felt distant: "I believe I love all the girls. Oh how much my heart is changed."[25]

Part of religious experience, especially in the early nineteenth century, was singing, and the diaries allude occasionally not only to the singing of psalms but also to stately hymns. When Chloe Conant's sister visited her in western Pennsylvania, the two girls sang psalms together each morning; Catherine Havens and her sister had hymn books with their names embossed on them. But an entry in Catherine Havens's diary from *The Children's Hymn Book* also serves as a reminder of the harshness in some of the religion these children experienced:

> Sleeper, Awake, for God is here. Attend his word, his Anger fear.
> For while you sleep his eyes can see, His arm of power can punish thee.
> This day is God's, the day He blest, His temple this,
> His holy rest, and can you here recline your head,
> And make the pew or seat your bed?
> Jehovah speaks, then why should you shut up your eyes and hearing too?
> In anger He might stop your breath, and make you sleep the sleep of death!
> Dear children then of sleep beware! To hear the sermon be your care;
> For if you all God's message mind, for sleep no season will you find.
> Remember Eutychus of old! He slept while Paul of Jesus told;
> In sleep he fell, in Acts 'tis said, that he was taken up for dead.

25. Clarke, "Diary," 22; Kendrick, *Life and Letters of Mrs. Emily C. Judson*, 20; Hannah Syng Bunting, "Diary of Hannah Syng Bunting," in Timothy Merritt, ed., *Memoir, Diary, and Letters of Miss Hannah Syng Bunting, of Philadelphia* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1837), 47; Ella Gertrude Thomas, "Diary of Ella Gertrude Thomas," in Virginia Ingraham Burr, ed., *Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848–1889* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 83.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hear this ye sleepers and be wise, and shut no more your slumbering eyes,
For 'tis an awful truth to tell that you can never sleep in Hell!

Catherine's mother disliked the song, thinking it "very severe." She found equally severe a hymn called "Hell" and forbade Catherine to learn it, though Catherine did not seem to mind. "We use the book *Watts & Select* in our church," she wrote, "and I know lots of them."[26]

For other children, the awe of religion came in its rituals. To receive the Lord's Supper in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was to declare oneself a member of the church, subject to its discipline and committed to its cause. Even members could be excluded if they were deemed unworthy. Chloe Conant watched with solemnity as the minister in her congregation excluded the unworthy, and her soberness reflected also her sense that she was not prepared to receive the Supper: "Oh I wished I was a Christian in heart, that I could sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb and celebrate his matchless love." Anna Smith also held back, despite a "great desire" to receive the bread and wine: "I had no evidence of an interest in Christ and the devil and my own wicked heart almost urged me to despair." Hannah Bunting was accustomed to observing the sacrament, waiting until "the happy time" when she could "with confidence approach my Father's Table." When she finally communed, she felt a "trembling awe, knowing that some had eaten and drunk unworthily." For Virginia Hoffman, however, the sacrament became the center of a joyful devotional life. She received it for the first time in December of 1847, praying that she would "never receive the communion unworthily," and she prepared for weeks for approaching sacramental Sundays, which brought her great happiness: "Communion to-day! I never have had like peace—I could almost feel that 'twas Jesus who broke the bread, and said, 'Love one another.'"[27]

All the practices occurred within a dense network of relationships with parents and friends, and for all of these children religious belief required intricate negotiations with admired others. "From your instructive lips," wrote Eliza Southgate to her parents in 1797, "I have been admonished to virtue, morality, and religion." Parents appear as significant religious influences in thirteen of the diaries, accompanying the children to church, reading to them, listening to their catechetical recitations, admonishing them, influencing their judgments and beliefs, and offering comfort and support. "People think I'm wild and

26. Havens, "Diary," 65.

27. Conant Bierce, *Journal*, 62; Smith, "Diary," 17; Bunting, "Diary," Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman*, 31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

queer," wrote thirteen-year-old Louisa May Alcott, "but Mother understands me and helps me." Fathers were fully as present as mothers, however, and they formed deep attachments to their children. Twelve of the diaries mentioned fathers; nine mentioned mothers. Fathers accompanied children to church and wrote letters urging them to pray or to read the Bible. Throughout the year of 1835, Anne Everett's father taught her French, Latin, and Italian, and they talked about her Sunday school lessons. The diaries are filled with hints of earnest efforts to please parents, to follow their example, to avoid their displeasure, and to maintain close relations with them. Hannah Bunting confessed to a severe handicap in her religious life: "I am in the slippery paths of youth," she wrote, "without the instruction of pious parents."[28]

Relations could be equally intense with friends. The children who wrote these diaries formed deep friendships, worried about friends, and fretted about what friends would think of them. Friends could discourage them from seeking a religious life, as Anna Smith discovered when she had to undergo "the agony of concealing my feelings from my friends." She came to fear that their "solicitations and temptations" pulled her away from "the Holy Spirit." Susan B. Anthony found also that her friendships hampered her resolutions "to do better": "when the morrow comes and I mingle with my companions all the resolutions are obliterated." For Chloe Conant, however, absence from her "dear friends at home" during her sojourn in Pennsylvania meant that she had "no conversation, no conversation respecting religion." Once drawn to take their religious faith seriously, the children yearned for their friends to join them: "My youthful companions rest weightily on my mind," wrote Hannah Bunting. "Would that I could persuade them to go with me." Virginia Hoffman and her close friend in faith met every Wednesday morning to pray for "friends whom we all know, and who are strangers to the love of Christ."[29]

III. What Children Believed

Such prayers must have often seemed fruitless. To read the diaries of religious children in early America is to be reminded that they often

28. Clarence Cook, ed., *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections from the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 5; Louisa May Alcott, "Diary," 36; Bush, *Memoir of Anne Gorham Everett*, 18, 41; Bunting, "Diary," 43. For later adult reflections on the influence of mothers, see Ann Taves, "Mothers and Children and the Legacy of Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Christianity," *Journal of Religion* 67 (April 1987): 203–19.

29. Smith, "Diary," 15, 16; Ida Husted Harper, *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bowen-Merrill, 1898), 28; Conant Bierce, *Journal*, 42; Bunting, "Diary," 43; Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman*, 47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

felt themselves surrounded by indifference. Chloe Conant, fresh from New England, was shocked to find that none of the children she taught in her new frontier Pennsylvania community had ever heard of God, Christ, or salvation. The emphasis in this essay falls on religious interests, but five of the diaries contain either no religious reflection or a bare minimum of perfunctory allusions. Fourteen-year-old Eliza Bowne, attending school in Medford, Massachusetts, in 1783, strove to be a virtuous young lady, but she never hinted that she set foot in a church or thought much about God. Thirteen-year-old Sallie Maddock traveled across the Oregon trail, witnessed terrible suffering and death, almost lost her own life, and introduced a religious reflection into her diary only at the end of the trip when she thanked Providence for their successful journey. William Bircher, sixteen-year-old drummer boy for a Wisconsin regiment in the Civil War, saw men die all around him for a year and maintained a detailed diary that never introduced a religious inquiry. Thirteen-year-old Blanche Butler Ames, a Protestant in a Catholic preparatory school, never puzzled at all about the religious differences. Children with serious religious interests were probably in the minority in early America. What, then, preoccupied the children who did have more serious religious concern?[30]

Their diaries and letters repeated multiple themes—sin, salvation, conversion, worship, God, Christ, and others—but no single theme appeared as frequently as death. Nineteen of the children wrote about death, worried about it, tried to explain it, and encountered it through the demise of loved ones. The children were aware of their own mortality: "my abode here," wrote Martha Laurens, "might be longer or shorter." Virginia Hoffman hoped for improvement "if God spares my life another year." "We have the same reason to think that we shall live ten years hence," wrote Chloe Conant, "or that we shall live ten minutes. Oh, when I consider the brevity and uncertainty of life, it does not make me tremble as it might, to know I have broken the holy law and have sinned against a holy God." Catharine Seely thought of "youth" as "the time to prepare for death. We know not that we shall arrive at old age." And fourteen-year-old Elizabeth Thomas celebrated the New Year in 1848 with sober thoughts: "The idea that this year will go out tonight is solemn. May we all live to see another year." They spoke with friends and family members of "the shortness

30. Conant Bierce, *Journal*, 26–27; Cook, ed., *Girl's Life*, iii–iv; Sallie B. Hester Maddock, "Diary of Sallie B. Hester Maddock," in Kenneth L. Holmes, ed., *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 1:242; William Bircher, *A Drummer Boy's Diary* (St. Paul, Minn.: St. Paul Book and Stationery, 1889); Blanche Butler Ames, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century* (Clinton, Mass.: privately published, 1957).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of time, the certainty of death." For some of them, the time was indeed short: Mary Christie died when she was sixteen, Julia Cowles when she was eighteen, and Anne Everett when she was twenty.[31]

The children found death confusing and described it with contrasting metaphors. Death could be the "destroyer," or a "grizzly Tyrant," a "wretched thing" to "the wicked." Or it could be "a passing from one life into another," a "blessed thing"—akin to "pleasant fields"—for one who "feels ready to meet his Creator face to face." Charlotte Grimké described it with moving eloquence: Death was "that strange, mysterious, awful reality, that is constantly around and among us, that power which takes away from us so many of those whom we love and honor." These children could feel loss deeply: Elizabeth Lee felt, when her grandmother died, that she was having a terrifying dream: "O I wish I could wake!" The event seemed "almost too sacred to write about. . . . O that funeral, it seems as if we could not let her be shut up in the dark earth, though I know it was only her body, her angel spirit may have been hovering above us, wanting to comfort her poor children." But along with the comfort came darker thoughts: "I am almost tempted," she confessed, "to murmur against God for calling grandmomma away." When Robert Bishop lost his sister, he wanted to join her in death: "Dear Kate is gon is gone is gone to heven before us but I hope we will all be ther soon. I am trying to be a good boy so I can meet her in heaven." When he went back to Sunday school, however, he could do nothing but cry: "I thought if Kate was ther but she wasant. She was last Sunday. I dident go to church."[32]

They comforted themselves with thoughts of heaven. Twelve of the diaries reflected on heaven, sometimes as a way of facing an immediate loss, other times as an object of speculation. When she was twelve, Harriet Beecher wrote a school composition on the topic: "Can the Immortality of the Soul be Proved by the Light of Nature?" Her conclusion: No, it could not, and only "the blessed light of the Gospel" enabled humanity to trace its "glorious destiny." Her brother Henry reflected in his journal about "who will enjoy heaven most?" For the most part, however, heaven appeared simply as a place of "rest" or "happiness" or "reward"—a "glorious prize"—for themselves or for loved ones. Henry Ward Beecher experienced moments when he could "feel drawn up toward heaven, my home" and "look upon the

31. Ramsay, ed., *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 31; Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman*, 31; Conant Bierce, *Journal*, 67; Seely, *Memoir of Catharine Seely*, 16; Thomas, "Diary," 81; Judson, *Memoir*, 20.

32. Irish, "Diary," 18, 24; Cowles, *Diaries*, 44; Seely, *Memoir*, 14; Grimké, "Diary," 47; Lee, "Diary," 14; Weatherford, ed., "School and Other Days," 63.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

earth as a place of pilgrimage and not an abiding city." In those moments, he wrote, he felt "true happiness."[33]

While all the children hoped for heaven, some of them also feared hell. At the last judgment, Chloe Conant wrote, the righteous would be gathered home but the wicked would receive "that dreadful sentence" and "descend into that dreadful abyss, there to remain through the endless ages of eternity." She knew that she would be required to "give account of every action, word and thought," and she was uncertain of her fate. Thrown from a horse, she wondered: What if I had died? "Where would my soul have gone?" She feared that it would have been in "an awful condition." Eight of the children wrote about divine judgment and punishment, sometimes—again—with speculative intent, sometimes out of a sense of anxiety. Sixteen-year-old Henry Ward Beecher wrote a "Proof of a Hell" in which he demonstrated that "there must be a hell" and so "there must be a judgment." More often, though, the concerns were more immediate: "I felt as if every moment," wrote Anna Smith, "I was in danger of my being consigned to an everlasting Hell and that each moment I was spared was a surprise."[34]

Many of these children thought of themselves as sinful. Fifteen of the diaries complained bitterly of the difficulty of escaping "the monster sin." They agonized about their sinfulness, though it is not always simple to discover what they meant. For some of them, especially the younger ones, sin meant doing bad things and harboring bad thoughts. For eleven-year-old Louisa May Alcott, it meant having a "bad temper." For others, sinfulness meant self-indulgence and a failure to meet a high standard of external conduct and inner resolve. Some spoke of sinfulness specifically as "pride," others as "ingratitude" to Jesus for his gift of salvation, and for still others, it was a matter of "lukewarm" convictions. For a few, it meant preoccupation with "worldly pleasure" instead of religious meditation and service to others. For Charlotte Grimké it was an inability to forgive. The more earnest children seem to have expected themselves to maintain religious devotion and inner feeling at a high level every day, and each moment of inner relaxation seemed a lapse. Whatever they meant, they were referring to something that they thought robbed them of happiness. "I do nothing right," wrote Harriet Beecher. "I yield to temptation almost as soon as it assails me . . . My sins took away all

33. Fields, ed., *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 30; Beecher and Scoville, *Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, 101, 110; Lee, "Diary," 4; Seely, *Memoir*, 14.
34. Conant Bierce, *Journal*, 36, 65; Beecher and Scoville, *Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, 110; Smith, "Diary," 16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

my happiness." Some described themselves in the exaggerated language typical of nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicalism: "I am," wrote Anna Smith, "the chief of sinners."[35]

They envisioned God, therefore, primarily as Judge and Redeemer. For sixteen-year-old James Henley Thornwell, who would become the most eminent Presbyterian theologian in the antebellum South, God was the One "to whom he must finally render an account for his conduct here." But while eight of the diaries alluded to the divine Judge, thirteen of them made a special point of praising God's love, mercy, and goodness. God was a "heavenly Father," a "reconciled Father," a "merciful God." Harriet Beecher, offspring of a Calvinist household, puzzled about the matter: "Do you suppose that God really loves sinners before they come to Him? Some say that we ought to tell them that God hates them, that he looks upon them with utter abhorrence, and that they must love Him before He will look on them otherwise. Is it right to say to those who are in deep distress, 'God is interested in you; he feels for and loves you?'" She reasoned her way to a loving God.[36]

God was also—for a few of the children—the Creator of nature, whose "almighty power" and "goodness" manifested itself in the natural world. Nine documents contained reflections on "Nature and . . . Nature's God," and for some of their young authors the beauty and order of the natural world seemed to provide evidence of God's presence. "Who can say 'there is no God?'" asked Phebe Irish: "We cannot look around without beholding something in which the almighty power of Jehovah is manifest." Writing in an era when "natural theology" seemed utterly convincing to most American theologians, Phebe Irish found that it was the harmonies of nature that allowed her to "reflect much on the goodness of that almighty Being whose works are perfect." Anne Everett's Sunday school teacher impressed the twelve-year-old with Archdeacon William Paley's "watchmaker argument": just as we infer a watchmaker from a watch, "so we judge of the power, wisdom, and goodness of God, by his great works." Henry Ward Beecher recognized, even at the age of sixteen, that nature could be baffling for a believer in an all-powerful

35. Bunting, "Diary," 41, 43, 45, 46; Louisa May Alcott, "Diary," 110; Ramsay, ed., *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 41; Beecher and Scoville, *Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, 102; Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman*, 42; Lyman, "Diary," 245; Grimké, "Diary," Fields, ed., *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 52; Smith, "Diary," 15.

36. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, Va.: Whittet and Shepperson, 1875), 47; Conant Bierce, *Journal*, 34; Bunting, "Diary," 47; Seely, *Memoir*, 14; Ramsay, ed., *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 33; Fields, ed., *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 62.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God, but he trusted that the ambiguity would finally disappear: "God's plans are like a hive of bees, for they seem to go on without any order till they are accomplished, but then you can see a great plan. Each seems to be pursuing something for itself, but, like the bees, they at the end help to form one elegant edifice."[37]

More often than nature, however, it was Christ who offered comfort. Eleven of the diaries offered moments of reflection on Jesus, who appeared as friend, example, and redeemer. Virginia Hoffman felt confident that she could endure suffering "while Christ is with me and while resting upon Him," and that confidence enabled her, at the age of sixteen, to embark on a mission to Africa's southern coast, despite the entreaty of friends who tried to convince her that she was "too pretty to go among the heathen of Africa." She died in Africa nine years later. When Harriet Beecher was fourteen, she gained a measure of respite from her inner turmoil when she heard her father preach on "Jesus as a soul friend offered to every human being." "Oh how much I needed just such a friend," she wrote. Jesus was, for several of the children, "friend," "brother," and "savior." For some of them, he was the divine Son of Christian orthodoxy, one of "the sacred Three" of the ineffable Trinity. But Jesus also provided "the image," the "pattern," to which some of these children felt obliged to conform, and their efforts to discern the ethical implications of their faith formed a large part of their reflection.[38]

They set for themselves a high ethical standard. James Henley Thornwell wrote of the "duty" of every person "to act upon other than selfish motives." Some of the diaries spoke of the necessity for "virtue" while others placed their emphasis on "holiness," but almost a fourth—ten of them—struggled with the meaning of an ethical life, and fifteen made earnest "resolutions" to be "better." For some, the resolve was merely to be "good." For Virginia Hoffman, the determination was to "become more like my Saviour, till at the end of life I be found perfect." Charlotte Grimké resolved to "cultivate a Christian spirit" in thinking of her enemies, Emily Judson, to live for something other than "myself." Some agonized about the difficulty: "Oh, I must be better." Susan B. Anthony almost despaired—"Resolves and resolves fill up my time"—and Louisa May Alcott felt a similar difficulty: "I've made so many resolutions, and written sad notes, and

37. Irish, "Diary," 30–31, 35; Grimké, "Diary," 35; Bush, *Memoirs of Anne Gorham Everett*, 12; Beecher and Scoville, *Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, 110.

38. Bunting, "Diary," 23, 44; Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman*, 36, 44; Field, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 51; Sarah Newman Cornell Ayer, *Diary of Sarah Cornell Ayer, Andover and Newburyport, Massachusetts* (Portland, Maine: Lefavor–Tower, 1910), 6; Smith, "Diary," 18; Ramsay, ed., *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 34.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cried over my sins, and it doesn't seem to do any good! Now I'm going to work really, for I feel a true desire to improve."[39]

For a few of the children, the resolution to improve entailed a resolve to better the world around them: nine of the diaries expressed discontent over social injustice. No one felt it more deeply than sixteen-year-old Charlotte Grimké, whose Quaker conscience rebelled against slavery. She resolved early to devote her time and her life to the struggle "on behalf of the oppressed," and she evaluated everything in her life, from school to reading, in terms of its ability to fit her for "laboring in a holy cause" for "oppressed and suffering people." Ridiculed by some of her classmates, she yearned to persuade them to "look upon all God's creatures without respect to color, feeling that it is character alone which makes the true man or woman." When Boston authorities allowed Southern slave-catchers to return the escapee Anthony Burns to his master in 1854—an event that inflamed the region—she lamented that "many Christian ministers" would fail even "to mention him, or those who suffer with him": "How many will speak from the pulpit against the cruel outrage on humanity which has just been committed, or against the many, even worse ones, which are committed in this country every day." She saw the issue in religious terms: "All this is done to prevent a man, whom God has created in his own image, from regaining that freedom with which he, in common with every other human being, is endowed."[40]

The social conscience of children embraced other causes, as well. Quaker Phebe Irish thought it unjust that "some are dressed in the vainest of fashions, and eating the best of food, while others would be glad to pick up a piece of dry bread on the road." She agonized, moreover, about "the horrors of war" and decided that she could not approve of violence even for self-defense. And she worried that the "evil of drunkenness" meant that "many a wife" had to labor to feed a neglected family. For James Henley Thornwell, the outrage was dueling: this "squeamish sense of false honor" was, he thought, "contrary to human dignity." Anna Alcott linked her religious faith to a refusal even to kill animals, feeling that God gave them life not to be destroyed but to enjoy. Caroline Clarke repudiated the anti-immigrant ideology of the Know-Nothing movement, commenting that her family's Irish gardener would make as good a president as anyone

39. Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 47; Cook, ed., *A Girl's Life*, 5; Cummins, *Life of Mrs. Virginia Hale Hoffman*, 31, 44; Ramsay, *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 37; Weatherford, ed., "School and Other Days," 63; Clarke, "Diary," 30; Grimké, "Diary," 38; Kendrick, ed., *Life and Letters of Mrs. Emily C. Judson*, 36; Harper, *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*, 28; Lyman, "Diary," 244; Louisa May Alcott, "Diary," 36.

40. Grimké, "Diary," 34, 37, 38.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

else. And she also took up the cause of women's rights. She attended a lecture by Susan B. Anthony—now grown to maturity in 1855—and signed a petition on behalf of the right of women "to vote and rule as the men." Her grandmother bristled at the feminism and said that women should, as St. Paul said, keep silent, but Clarke reminded her grandmother that Mrs. Sands had testified in the prayer meeting. The grandmother saw the point.[41]

IV. Continuity and Change

A collection of diaries and letters written over a ninety-year period presents the vexing problem of change through time. The child who scribbled entries into a journal in 1860 surely lived in a culture different from one that gave Anna Winslow her sense of who she was in 1770. What do the documents tell us about changes in the religious experience of children? By no means do they display any unilinear trajectory of religious change—no trend toward Calvinism or anti-Calvinism, no creeping liberalism or encroaching conservatism, no transition from a gloomy and somber piety to greater cheer and joy. The early nineteenth century witnessed a striking development in the depiction of children in literature, painting, and sometimes even in religious writing, as illustrated both in Unitarian doctrines of childhood innocence and in Horace Bushnell's notions of Christian nurture. Novelists, poets, and painters depicted images of the saintly child, the young republican citizen, or the unspoiled and self-reliant young romantic. But only rarely did this transition make its way into the diaries of the children themselves. At least for children in the larger Protestant denominations, the contents of the diaries remained remarkably stable from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.[42]

At the same time, the course of intellectual and historical change found a mirror in the diaries—and the experiences—of these children. As we have seen, some of the diaries registered the growing interest among American theologians after 1770 in a "rational orthodoxy" that looked for evidence of God's existence in signs of design and order in the world and that sought "proofs" that the Bible was a unique revelation from God. The diaries also reflected the force of other theological innovations. Virginia Hoffman's interest in the liturgical

41. Sheldon, "Diary," 12; Chauncey H. Cooke, *Soldier Boy's Letters to His Father and Mother, 1862–5* (n.p.: News Office, 1915), 19; Louisa May Alcott, "Diary," 106; Irish, "Diary," 17; Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 50; Anna Alcott, "Diary," 88; Caroline Clarke, "Diary," 49.

42. Priscilla A. Brewer, "'The Little Citizen': Images of Children in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American Culture* 7 (Winter 1984): 54–55, 60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

calendar and her sacramental piety reflected the intensification of high church sentiments among a large number of Episcopalians after 1811. Lyman Beecher's children displayed a questioning spirit that bore some of the marks of his own struggle with Old School Calvinism during the 1820s. The Alcott daughters evinced a religious sensibility that echoed their parents' transcendentalist love for nature in the 1830s, while the excitement of Conant Bierce about Finney—as well as Hannah Bunting's camp-meeting ardor—registered the influence of new forms of revivalism on the tone and feel of religion for some children. The changes were multi-linear, drawing children into a variety of distinctive religious experiences, and the options multiplied after the Revolution.

Just as religious and theological changes made a difference, so the tensions of American society—and the nation's battles over social reform—also altered the religious awareness of some of these children. Young Thornwell's indignation about the sinfulness of dueling emerged against the background of growing Protestant antagonism to the practice after the duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr in 1804. Charlotte Grimké drew inspiration from clerical participation in the abolitionist movement after 1833. Caroline Clarke's disquiet about nativist prejudice and her enthusiasm for feminism in the 1850s colored her attitudes toward her local church. Events mattered, not only personal events like death and sickness but also the social traumas and reform impulses that moved the nation. Such children as Charlotte Grimké and Caroline Clarke experienced religion differently from their colonial predecessors because they felt the force of different historical events.

The diaries revealed, in addition, the extent to which institutional change in Protestantism altered the way children felt and lived their faith. The standard means of instructing children religiously in colonial America was the catechism. Between 1641 and 1663, Calvinist clergy in New England wrote at least fourteen catechisms, including John Cotton's *Milk for Babes, Drawn Out of the Breasts of both Testaments*, which Cotton Mather later described as the catechism that "usually fed" the children of the colony, and Mather believed that the catechizing accomplished "great things." The catechism stayed at the forefront of religious instruction for more than a century. By 1745, the Lutheran missionary Henry M. Muhlenberg could write that "a catechism is as much a necessity for us as our daily bread." Some Calvinist clergy in the eighteenth century led classes twice a week and others once a month, though some also neglected the duty. In Virginia, Anglican clergy catechized in the summer and during Lent, and in the 1720s, 92 percent of the Virginia clergy who responded to an inquiry

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the bishop of London reported that they taught the catechism for a period each year. Catechetical classes were common by 1770.[43]

By the 1820s, even the revivalist Methodists, who had neglected catechisms, were printing them and urging their use, though with limited success. In the antebellum churches, Presbyterians and Episcopalians still taught the catechism, and Philip Schaff wrote in 1855 that German Lutheran and Reformed pastors had "returned" to the "good old measures" of catechetical drill. But in 1844 the Congregationalist Enoch Pond also lamented the decline of "old fashioned catechizing." Congregations were supplementing it with other methods.[44]

The increasing prominence of the Sunday school in the 1820s altered the tone of religious experience for many Protestant children. Offering far more than merely doctrinal instruction, the Sunday schools tried to attract children with singing, pious stories, pictures, picnics, and competitions. The allusions in the diaries to the model tabernacles, the festivals, the tracts for children, and the memorized poetry suggested a style of formation quite different from that of the catechetical recitations, even though catechism classes often continued in the Sunday school setting. References to the Sunday schools in the diaries revealed a pedagogy that touched the emotions with stories and songs alongside the memory work. As the beneficiaries of technological advances in a publishing industry that flooded the nation with cheap tracts, storybooks, pictures, songbooks, and illustrated Bibles, the children of the Sunday schools could, by mid-century, learn about Christianity in ways far more diverse and multifaceted than could earlier generations.[45]

43. David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 168; Cotton Mather, *Manuductio ad Ministerium*, ed. John Ryland (London: Charles Dilly, 1781), 115; Henry M. Muhlenberg, *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1942), vol. 1, pp. 77, 99, 329, 446; George Maclaren Bryden, *Virginia's Mother Church and the Political Conditions Under Which It Grew* (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1947), 372–73; John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 219.
44. Pond, *Young Pastor's Guide*, 226; Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character*, ed. Perry Miller (1st ed., 1855; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 163; Arthur C. Repp, Sr., *Luther's Catechism Comes to America* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1982), 220–38; George Washington Doane, "The Church's Care for Little Children," *Sermons on Various Occasions* (London: Rivington, 1842), 671–72; James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe, *The Methodists* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 184.
45. Robert W. Lynn, *The Big Little School: Two Hundred Years of the Sunday School* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1980), 2–38; Boylan, *Sunday School*, 6–21; Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1770–1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10–88.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One additional change must have exercised at least an unconscious influence on the Sunday school children. The catechists of the late eighteenth century had usually been the pastors, though mothers and fathers also had catechetical responsibilities. But the duties of teaching in the Sunday schools increasingly fell to women, so the children learned to relate themselves to women outside the home as religious models and authorities. The diaries mentioned home visits, lessons learned, and relationships formed with female teachers. Insofar as associations with respected authorities enter into the texture of a child's religious experience, the leadership of women in the schools could not have been without significance.[46]

Yet for most Protestant children the continuities in the decades between 1770 and 1860 were fully as conspicuous as the changes. Most of them shared a common Protestant religious sensibility regardless of when they wrote. Among these forty-four young diarists and letter writers, the majority echoed familiar Christian themes that marked the piety of their parents and that cut across denominational boundaries: awe before God, gratitude to Jesus, a yearning for security, and a sense of responsibility to follow the ethical teachings of the New Testament. Above all, the children touched repeatedly on the mystery of death and on their desire to leave sinfulness behind and live a good life.

What did it mean that the content of children's religious concerns—the fear of death and the desire for virtue—persisted in relatively stable form even as many features of the larger religious culture they inhabited were changing? The simplest answer would be that they thought and felt what parents, teachers, and clergy taught them to think and feel. This answer would tell us something about the religious core of Protestant culture in early America. It would reveal what adults thought were the essentials that had to be transmitted to the next generation. An additional answer, however, might be that the children thought most often about the themes that most deeply touched their emotions. Their frequent recourse to the topics of death and virtue, from this perspective, would be seen as evidence for the potency of feelings and affections in the religion of early American children, the primacy of emotive dispositions ranging from fearfulness and a yearning for protection and security to a desire for approval, mutuality, and love. And this too might tell us something important about the central issues of early American Protestant culture.

In 1990, psychiatrist Robert Coles published the results of his extended conversations with children throughout the world about their

46. Boylan, *Sunday School*, 101–32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

religious life. Working from a psychoanalytic perspective but determined to pursue "the phenomenological acceptance of the immediate, the everyday," he discovered that children of the late twentieth century often described the deep moments of their lives with the language of their religious traditions. Coles's children, who ranged in age from eight to thirteen, had many of the same interests as the children of early America. The Christian children whom he interviewed spoke of God as one who rewards and punishes, as friend, healer, and judge, and they spoke of Jesus as friend, teacher, healer, and savior. They thought about salvation and linked it to conceptions of heaven, and they strove to be better people. Most prayed, and some prayed often. They had important religious relationships both with their parents and with ministers and priests. Like the children of an earlier era, they spoke of death, and they talked of sin. But it was easy to see the differences between these children of the twentieth century and their predecessors in early America. For the children who wrote the early American diaries, death was much more at the forefront of consciousness, and so also was sinfulness—especially their own sinfulness—and the fear of divine judgment. Poignantly aware of mortality and suffering, worried about their sin, and hopeful that they might lead a better life, the children of the diaries lived—despite all the similarities to the children of Robert Coles—in a different inner world.[47]

47. Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 21, 36, 108, 114, 198, 207, 209, 212, 324. Diaries that I examined but from which I did not quote include: Elizabeth Fuller, "Diary of Elizabeth Fuller," *History of the Town of Princeton in the County of Worcester and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1795–1919*, by Francis Edward Blake (Princeton, Mass.: Francis Blake, 1915); Susanna Holyoke Ward, "Diary of Susanna Holyoke Ward," *The Holyoke Diaries 1709–1865*, ed. George Francis Dow (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1911); Mary A. Christie, *Diary of Mary A. Christie* (Alexandria, Va.: Alexander Street Press, 2004); and Elizabeth Ann McAuley Egbert, "Diary of Elizabeth Ann McAuley Egbert," in Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700500043 Published online by Cambridge University Press