Goldman: Readiness for Religion

In his work ‘Readiness for Religion: A basis for developmental religious education’ (1965), Goldman considered how far a child’s environment could be enriched so as to enable them to grow into more mature ways of religious thought. His aim was to determine at what age are human beings really ready for religion.

1. Very Young Children

According to Goldman, young children are capable of only very limited religious understanding. They tend to understand things only in a literal way and so cannot appreciate concepts such as love, holiness, justice, good, evil, sin or human freedom. He argues that the Bible should not be taught to the very young because they are unable to grasp its true meaning and significance and that classic Bible stories such as Moses and the Burning Bush and The Crossing of the Red Sea should not be taught to children of an early age: ‘The last year in junior school for the most able pupils may be the earliest time when these stories can be understood…’

For Reflection: Do you agree with this view of Bible stories?

In ‘Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence’ (1964) he claims that the danger of teaching Bible and other religious stories too early is that children not only misunderstand them at the time, but carry on misunderstanding them forever. He challenges teachers who claim that children should be taught religious stories as early as possible as being a ‘gross distortion’. He says such an action crams children’s minds with false ideas and focuses only on trivial ideas which will lead to ‘arrested development’ where children are satisfied with explanations that are far too simple:

‘…the child is satisfied by his too simple explanation, his thinking is crystallised too soon and he sees no need to think further in relation to the story. ‘Too much, too soon’ is now regarded as a danger.’

Young children see God in physical terms, as an old man who lives in heaven, which is above the sky and who sometimes visits the world. He is big, powerful, sometimes angry, loving and scary – all at the same time. The children have black and white notions of good and bad, heaven and hell. Moreover, if stories are told and re-told, they become too familiar and no longer fresh and the child becomes bored with them. Goldman also found that very young children tend to pray egocentrically – for themselves, their families and for material possessions. They give little thought for the world beyond. As J.J. Smith (1941) observed: ‘We must expect an infant’s religion to be infantile.’
2. Older Children
Goldman argued that the capacity for religious insight and understanding really begins around the age of 13 years. At this time, young people begin to move away from a literal interpretation of the stories and can more readily consider more abstract and symbolic ideas. ‘The recommendation may have to be faced that very little biblical material is suitable before secondary school...’

At this age, they tend to have slightly confused views – they still hold on to some literal notions of God, but are also growing increasingly aware of science and the views it offers about the origin and nature of the world and our environment. When faced with a dilemma: ‘The evidence is that the great majority resolve their tension by keeping the supernatural and the natural world in separate compartments.’

However, in this age range, they are much more ready and open to understanding religious ideas. They begin to understand about such concepts as the power of God, the problem of evil and suffering and the nature of justice and righteousness. But with this come questions and doubts about why God does not make everything perfect and what is the purpose of life. Such young people still pray and their prayers are less egocentric – they express desire to be a better person and put great emphasis on health, safety and world peace. As they grow into mid-teens, young people are much more ready for religion. They can understand higher concepts such as holiness, sin and unconditional love. There is also the time of growing spiritual awareness and a more realistic view of religion and the scriptures.

By 17-18 years, readiness for religion is complete as the ‘childishness of religion’ is replaced by deeper spiritual insights and greater questioning of religious ‘truths’. Prayers at this age are much more concerned with confession of sins and seeking forgiveness. God is seen to offer calm and peace in a time of great doubt and many questions – a time when seeking the truth of religion really begins, when young people: ‘...begin to achieve a deeper understanding of religious faith and a belief in God which is intellectually satisfying.’

For Reflection: Do you agree with Goldman’s views about the age of readiness for religion? What are the strengths and weaknesses of his argument?

Writing Task:
(a) Explain how developmental theories of religion help our understanding of the relationship between religion and the individual. (30)
(b) Assess the view that older people are more religious than younger people. (20)