ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON EDUCATION

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St John Chrysostom's formal treatise on education De Inani Gloria et de Educandis Libris, has received a marked degree of attention since its authenticity was established by a German scholar S. Haidacher, who in 1907 dispelled the doubts held by some earlier editors and provided the world of learning not only with a valuable introduction to Chrysostom's treatise but also with a selection of extracts from various homilies by Chrysostom in which he discussed education and topics allied to it. The first printed edition of the work appeared in Paris in 1656, the work of a Dominican scholar, Francois Combefis, who used a manuscript, the Parisinus Graecus copied late in the tenth century or early in the eleventh,¹ and who added a Latin translation. It was not until 1914 that a new edition of the Greek text was provided by another German, F. Schulte, but, as M.L.W. Laistner points out,² despite the long time between the two editions of the original text, the treatise was kept to the forefront by subsequent reprintings of Combefis' Latin translation and especially by the diarist John Evelyn's English version of 1659 entitled appropriately enough The Golden Book of St John Chrysostom Concerning the Education of Children. Evelyn's translation was reissued in 1825 by William Upcott and recently, in 1951, Laistner included a translation of the treatise in his Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire.³

The question of the date of the work has been discussed at length; it has been assigned variously, on the basis of internal evidence, to the time when Chrysostom was at Constantinople as Patriarch, i.e. after 397 A.D., and also to the earlier period of his life when he was at Antioch, i.e. after his ordination to the priesthood in 386 A.D.⁴ Thus, Haidacher opts for the Antiochene period, Schulte's scepticism leads him to leave the question unanswered, while Baur⁵ gives his approval to the early period.

4. The date of Chrysostom's birth is uncertain, varying between 347 A.D. and 354 A.D., but it is certain that after baptism in 370 A.D. he abandoned the world to study Scripture as both monk and hermit, ultimately returning, as a result of undermined health, to Antioch to become a priest.
5. His two volumes, John Chrysostom and His Time (Sands & Co., 1959) provide a scholarly commentary on Chrysostom's life.
Laistner argues the question very convincingly, concluding that there is no satisfactory criterion for dating the work, and leaves us with the impression that whenever it was written, it exemplified, in the best possible manner, Chrysostom's 'transcendent powers of speech' and his greatness as a teacher of practical morality and as an expounder of Holy Scripture.

As Chrysostom sees it, vainglory, luxury and debauchery were the main vices of Antioch, especially vainglory 'which is bringing ruin on the whole body of the Church' and which is likened to a wild beast 'swooping on a healthy, tender and defenseless body' and fastening its teeth in its victim, injecting poison and filling it with 'noisome stench'. Chrysostom's purpose is to guard youth from such serious vices by teaching parents the right way to bring up their sons and daughters and he castigates parents for neglecting what he considers to be important areas in moral training, viz. disdain of money and fame, modesty, fair dealing and a regard for human values, and the necessity of overcoming one's nature by the virtue of one's life-style.

In a series of vivid metaphors, children in the early formative years are compared to wax capable of receiving all kinds of impressions (anticipations of John Locke in the seventeenth century!), to pearls that begin as mere drops of water, to statues in the creative hands of artists and to growing cities in need of the provisions and laws of city planners. The mind of a child is a city and the traditional five senses act as bulwarks and gates of that city. Education is primarily the proper disciplining of these senses.

Chrysostom then proceeds to deal with these 'gates' in turn, in each instance pointing out the dangers, as he sees them in a rigorously moralistic sense, to be avoided by parents. At the same time, he provides parents with plenty of positive advice, though some of his exhortations would cause more than a smile to modern listeners, e.g. not exposing young boys to the sight of a beautiful woman out of fear of their possible seduction, for which the remedy is a segregation of the sexes or else to be approached by 'some ancient maid or woman that is well stricken in years.' It is well to remember that Chrysostom was a spiritual leader and that it was expected of him to provide guide-lines for his flock living as they did in times of great stress and strain. As he saw it, it was a time for solid moral instruction, for the cultivation of sobriety, modesty and prudence in the face of so much luxury, rashness and folly, and concupiscence. Many Christians were such in name only, frequenting the wine shops, the theatre and the hippodrome, celebrating the Kalends of January with the pagans. They were not attracted to the Church because of the profundity of its dogma, but rather it was the moral teaching of the Gospels, the emphasis on Christian

6. Translations in this paragraph are Laistner's.
charity and the hope that they, downtrodden and often despised, would be rescued from their miseries that drew them into the Church. Chrysostom saw his task was to improve them, instruct and edify and interest them and, if he stresses the moral element almost to the exclusion of the intellectual, it is because he saw this element was widely neglected in his time. As Laistner puts it in his translation 'In our own day every man takes the greatest pains to train his boy in the arts, in literature and rhetoric. But to exercise this child's soul in virtue, to that no man any longer pays heed.'

Although Chrysostom's views on the upbringing of children are best known through his formal treatise, his ideas on education are developed further in the many homilies he preached. Chrysostom left more written works than any other Greek father of the Church, though few of them actually originated in writing, but were mostly homilies of guidance for Christian parents. His homilies on the New Testament, on Statues and other items, fill sixteen volumes in the Library of the Fathers series published in English at Oxford from 1839 to 1852. Well schooled in the precepts of rhetoric by the pagan rhetorician Libanius, he built up a reputation as an orator even as a student, and he is unquestionably classified as peerless among many orators and among exegetes, manifesting a profound literal knowledge of sacred scripture. He did not develop carefully selected points as so many other noted orators have done, e.g. Demosthenes and Cicero; rather he is prone to be sketchy and repetitious, and often he lacks structural unity. Yet as Paul R.W. Harkins points out in the Ancient Christian Writers series, he always has a spiritual unity designed to confirm his hearers' faith and to provide correction of their lives, and 'no matter what we think of the tastes of the Eastern Greeks who heard him, no matter how foreign his sermons are to our standards of today, the fact is that no orator has aroused more enthusiasm or exercised so complete a mastery over his audience,' who often interrupted him with applause and shouts of admiration as well as shedding tears of repentance.

In many of these homilies, Chrysostom introduces educational topics that show his more than passing interest in the question of the education of children. In his homilies on the Epistles of St Paul, he gives a very full picture of what he considers to be a new Christian paideia. Commenting on Ephesians, Chrysostom stresses the necessity of teaching children to be lovers of true wisdom, not to be orators but to be philosophers, as all the rhetoric in the world will be of no advantage if there is no philosophy. It is clear from this and other passages that Chrysostom had little sympathy for the excessively rhetorical type of education that predominated in his day, and that he made a deliberate effort to replace it.

with a Scripture-oriented paideia that stressed moral rather than intellectual virtues. For all his sympathy for philosophy, it must, however, be Christian philosophy, and not the pagan philosophy of the 'barbarians and Greeks. Though he was well read in pagan literature and was not ungrateful for the training he had received in classical culture, classical philosophy left no deep traces in Chrysostom, and he knew which side he was on in the battle in the fourth century between paganism and Christianity. Socrates did not impress him, though he gave grudging praise when he pointed out that Socrates endured a shrewish wife in order to have at home a school and training place of philosophy. The remark apparently drew guffaws from Chrysostom's hearers but he tells them that he is pained that 'heathens prove better lovers of wisdom than we who are commanded to . . . follow God himself in respect of gentleness.'

Plato is treated with uncompromising hostility, the Socratic dialogues having their groundwork in vainglory and the *Republic* in particular is a tissue of nonsense, chiefly because of Plato's views on community of wives. Commenting on St Paul's speech on the Areopagus, he says 'Produce here Plato and all that he has philosophized about God, all that Epicurus has, and all is but trifling to this.' The reading of the Scriptures, then, should replace the works of the pagan philosophers in the training of Christians. They contain the laws according to which the practice of virtue should be guided.

Chrysostom has much to say in his homilies on the father's role in bringing up his son, being very concerned, in particular, that youth be guided along right lines of conduct to keep them away from indulging themselves in unbridled pleasure. Often he is quite critical of fathers for neglecting to take proper care of their households, and also for indulging their own pleasures by attending the theatre where they sit feasting their eyes 'on the naked limbs of women' and being exposed to 'spectacles and songs containing nothing but irregular loves.' Rather quaintly, he recommends, more than once in his sermons, early marriage as a remedy for youthful lust, as it is the divinely sanctioned remedy for human concupiscence and the sanest preservation of continence.

Much of what Chrysostom has to say on a mother's educational role is influenced by his own upbringing at the hands of his mother, Anthusa, a wise, understanding and well educated woman who, widowed by the time she was twenty, devoted the rest of her life to managing the household and property of her patrician husband and to the education of her two children. In a homily on the first epistle of Paul to Timothy, he indicates the duties of mothers in bringing up their daughters through watching over them, and regulating their lives so that they will be 'pious, modest, despisers of wealth, indifferent to

ornament’ and disposing them to be good housekeepers and wives. He sees the mother’s role as important in the early education of children of both sexes as she is more often at home than the father, distracted by work and civic affairs. It is her duty, no less than a man’s, ‘to provide for their children and lead them to philosophy’, and he makes the point that the education of children is one of her great tasks since through this avenue she can achieve her salvation in spite of the fact that ‘the woman (Eve) taught once and ruined all’!

A tone of moderate realism pervades Chrysostom’s views on the place of discipline in education. The fullest statement is in his formal treatise where he gives some sound advice on the necessity of making known to the child what is expected of him and then making sure that when the child transgresses these laws, some chastisement will necessarily follow. This chastisement will, however, vary, sometimes with a sharp reproof, sometimes with a stern look, and sometimes with soothing promises. ‘Have not recourse to blows constantly and accustom him not to be trained by the rod; for if he feels it constantly as he is being trained, he will learn to despise it. And when he has learnt to despise it, he has reduced thy system to nought.’

In a homily on the second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, he speaks about the golden mean in discipline. ‘For this is especially the part of a teacher not to be hasty in taking vengeance, but to work a reformation and ever to be reluctant and slow in his punishments.’

As is his usual custom, he exemplifies his points with references to both Old and New Testament characters, Eli and John the Baptist for example, and reiterates his oft-expressed conviction that fear of consequences is a force for good in the discipline and correction of children by their parents, but it is not a fear to be brought about by coercive and brutalizing corporal punishment.

Throughout his exhortations to parents and those engaged in the upbringing of children, Chrysostom is at pains to stress the important role of the teachers ‘shining as lights on the world.’ Basing his views on the example of St Paul as a teacher, and being aware of the great task of forming Christians in a non-Christian world, he insistently reiterates that teachers of others should be as ‘leaven’, that they ‘may be as seed and may bear much fruit’, and recalls teacher and parent, as well as pupil, to the principles of discipline and duty in the formation of a character both fully human and genuinely Christian.

The writings of Chrysostom on education are full of positive directions as well as of negative warnings, and there is scarcely any phase of education in relation to child development that is not touched upon. He does not write long, discursive and frustratingly learned expositions on education: rather there is a

9. This translation is Laistner’s.
homeliness and practicality about his writings that undoubtedly springs from the nature of his calling as a preacher, as an exegete and as a spiritual leader.

Though in their history of education, McCormick and Cassidy read more into Chrysostom's educational importance than is warranted, they are not far off target when they state 'as a writer in pedagogical matters, Chrysostom surpasses all other ecclesiastical authors of the Patristic period',10 with the outstanding exception of St Augustine. It is true that Chrysostom in his address on vainglory and the upbringing of children touches on such topics as the home training of the child, the importance of an understanding of the child, training for citizenship, and the education of girls, but the topics are always treated with a practical homeliness that is far removed from academic discussions of such questions. In many ways this makes Chrysostom’s appeal all the more lasting.

Cardinal Newman in his well-known appreciation of St John Chrysostom in Vol. 2 of his *Historical Sketches* emphasises Chrysostom's 'wide-spirited attitude to human-kind and his respect for each individual man and woman as a person,'11 and sums up what made Chrysostom so appealing and of such interest to him and indeed to many in the twentieth century.

It is not force of words, nor cogency of argument, nor harmony of composition, nor depth or richness of thought which constitutes his power - whence, then, has he this influence, so mysterious, yet so strong?

I consider St Chrysostom's charm to lie in his intimate sympathy and compassionateness for the whole world, not only in its strength but in its weakness; in his lively regard with which he views everything that comes before him, taken in the concrete . . . . He may indeed be said in some sense to have a devotion of his own for every one who comes across him - for persons, ranks, classes, callings, societies, considered as divine works and the subjects of his good offices or good will . . . It is this observant benevolence which gives to his exposition of Scripture its chief characteristic.

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