

## Jesus Camp by Lynn Hunt

There is one thing missing from the children's chapel sessions in the movie that is rather surprising —stories (and) one would think that a ministry that believes “the Bible in its entirety to be the inspired Word of God and . . . our infallible guide of faith and conduct”<sup>1</sup> would use parables and stories in homilies for children, but telling stories is not the practice of Becky Fischer . . . I think it is a deliberate decision by Fischer . . . because stories promote nuanced thinking and intellectual inquiry not directed by categorical pronouncements. These children are being educated in a manner that . . . inhibits metaphorical thinking.

*The great end in religious instruction . . . is, not to stamp our minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; . . . not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may, in the course of Providence, be offered to their decision; not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, which rest on no foundation but our own word and will, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment, so that they may discern and approve for themselves what is everlasting right and good; ...In a word, the great object of all schools is to awaken intellectual and moral life in the child.<sup>2</sup>*

These words, spoken by William Ellery Channing in the first half of the 19th century, set a course for religious education in liberal Christianity that is still held as a measure of excellence. Phrases such as *not to stamp our minds*, *not to make them see with our eyes*, and *not to impose religion upon them* ring with a radical clarity that set forth a foundational respect for each individual student and child. These educational and religious understandings should be commonplace in today's world, yet, as the documentary film *Jesus Camp* shows, there are those who call for religious education to be the exact opposite of Channing's central concern against “ineradicable prejudices to [a] particular sect or peculiar notion.” This paper is an examination of some of the differences in religious education between those demonstrated in the film *Jesus Camp* and those that are commonplace in Sunday School programs in Unitarian Universalist and Ethical Culture congregations (and to some degree in liberal Christian programs). I will explore why these differences are important, not only for individuals, but also for our larger society, and will conclude with a few thoughts and suggestions on how to strengthen our humanist concerns in said programs.

In *Jesus Camp*, documentary filmmakers Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady chronicle the experiences of several children at the “Kids On Fire” summer camp, part of the children's ministry program of Becky Fischer, who heads Kids in Ministry International. Ms. Fischer grew up in what she calls a traditional Pentecostal Church and was “born again” at an early age. As an adult the Christ Triumphant Church in Lee's Summit, Missouri, ordained her, and she became a

youth pastor at the Word of Faith Church in Bismarck, North Dakota, affiliated with the non-denominational Rhema Ministerial Association.<sup>3</sup> This network of churches has produced some of the better-known Evangelical and tele-ministry leaders (including Benny Hinn and Joyce Meyers). Interestingly, others in the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements have criticized it for promoting the idea that God is an internal part of each individual, among other theological points.<sup>4</sup>

The film follows the lives of three children, with a primary focus on one boy, Levi, an eleven-year-old who is very serious about trying to be a good Christian, even engaging in preaching. The viewer sees these children at home, witnesses their home-schooling lessons and sees them preparing for camp. The focus of the film is their camp experience and commentary by camp director Fischer. In post camp sequences Levi's family attends a Sunday Service preached by the now infamous Ted Haggard and visits Washington, D.C. to participate in a small anti-abortion rally. Interspersed throughout the film is commentary by Air America radio host Mike Papatino on religious extremism and the growing political power of the religious right. The scenes that gained the most notoriety—praying before a cutout of President Bush, speaking in tongues—take place in a chapel time at the camp. Viewing the intensity of emotion during these scenes, one is left wondering what ever happened to singing goofy camp songs, canoeing and making nature crafts?

The answer to such questions lies in the single-minded and never-wavering devotion to the mission of Becky Fischer. She is an engaging and personable director who is resolute in her desire to build an army of children to usher in God's end-time. Key to this is a view that sees children being as capable as adults of preaching, healing and working to spread the Good Word of Jesus Christ. That adults manipulate and dominate children in this convoluted sense of respect is not evident to the people involved in the camp or to the parents of the children. They see their role as responsible adults, as one of taking children and making them useful in the war the adults feel is being waged against Christianity. Though they would probably describe themselves as joyous, fear surrounds all the people in this film; it is palpable. That same emotion is one of the main tools used by Fischer.

### **Use of Fear**

The idea that evil is an outside force personified in the Devil comes up again and again in the film. Sometimes it is somewhat comical: the camp counselors pray over computer equipment in Jesus' name so that the devil will not screw things up for them during camp. Sometimes it is startling: the children engage in an activity of smashing cups—representing the government that took Jesus from their schools. Sometimes the message is ignored: Fischer warns the children about the evils of Harry Potter (whom she indicates would be put to death for being a warlock if these were Old Testament times). At least one of the campers lets others know that he still watches the Harry Potter films. Most of all, it is heart-wrenching and appalling to watch a room of children in hysteric tears as they repent their sins and acknowledge that the Devil wants to destroy them with the temptation of sin.

The children are manipulated and pressured with the threat that the "Devil goes after the young." They are told how they are lured into sin by things that seem fun and harmless, but which grow and consume life. They are coerced to repent and wash away their sins, so as not to be phony Christians (people who act one way in church and another in school); there cannot be any phonies in the Army of God. During this sermon the tearful and distraught children individually repent their sins publicly.

What fears justify haranguing a group of children? Muslims deserve special concern because they are an enemy who are willing to train children to kill themselves for the cause of Islam. All non-Christians are viewed as lost souls and as enemies. (At one point, Levi indicates that his soul feels yucky whenever he meets a non-Christian). It is the mission of the adults in this film to prepare these children for the return of Jesus and to be sin-free upon his return.

Mostly the fear seems to be of the secular world in general. In the minds of the adults, the fear of losing their Christian nation and the prediction of a judgmental end-time justify frightening and manipulating children towards what Channing warned against: the “ineradicable prejudices” of their “particular sect.”

These views of course are antithetical to humanist adherence to natural explanations of life and death, and to a goal of understanding other’s perspectives of life while promoting a world of justice, equity and compassion. The notions deeply held by the protagonists of the film have long been rejected in the liberal religious tradition. Again, the words of Channing seem remarkably fresh:

The child is not a piece of wax to be moulded at another’s pleasure, not a stone to be hewn passively into any shape which the caprice and interest of others may dictate; but a living, thinking being, made to act from principles in his own heart, to distinguish for himself, to be in an important sense the author of his own character, the determiner of his own future being.<sup>4</sup>

The use of fear to persuade a congregation has long been abandoned by liberal churches and certainly by humanists. The notion of moving people to act while consumed with a powerful emotion is deplorable. That such tactics are used with children is even more disturbing since they lack the independence to remove themselves from a harmful situation. It is an act of extreme emotionalism that abuses adult authority over children and the societal compact to protect and nurture young lives.

### **Use of Emotions**

The ability to think nimbly and rationally is a hallmark of humanist values. So much so that in religious groupings humanists are often accused of lacking a sense of heart and feeling. While as a group we may be more prone to analysis and critical thinking than others in our society, we (humanists) are no less prone to feelings or emotions. I have participated in humanist circles/gatherings in which people wept with raw sorrow over the loss of a child, or expressed the anger they felt over the unexpected death of a parent. These adults and youth felt a sense of community strong enough to share their sorrow and rage about real life circumstances.

The curriculums found in today’s UU and Ethical Culture Sunday Schools regularly attend to and explore the emotions of children and youth. The knowledge that as human beings we feel sorrow, fear, joy, is a regular part of Sunday morning reflection and discussion, but a companion understanding is that we are also rational. Our schools explore issues to look both at the emotions they may raise, and whether those emotions have a rational basis in reality. We explore what is the best course of action to take, weighing both feelings and rational thought. This goal was clearly articulated in Unitarian approaches to religious education as early as 1931 when two curriculum committees agreed on the following goals for children:

- To *think* clearly on the meaning of human experience as revealed in history, literature, the arts and sciences.

- To *feel* the reality, harmony and nobility of the universe, as revealed in Nature and Personality.
- To *discipline* ourselves for the highest service which we may render.<sup>5</sup>

While we might choose different language to express these goals today, the main ideas of thinking and feeling moving to discipline are current and strong components in our religious education programs.

The experience of *Jesus Camp* is certainly one drenched in feeling, but thinking and discipline do not appear to be strong goals of the program. The scenes of children in group situations crying, calling out, speaking in tongues<sup>6</sup> are among the most disturbing in the film, and perhaps best described as manipulated mass hysteria. (Some of the children in the group appear to be rather young—around five or six.) It is hard to imagine any Director of Religious Education in a UU or Ethical Culture congregation feeling a sense of pride as a group activity reveals children distraught over ideas of salvation and sin, or to imagine them in such a state of anxiety over these abstractions. I suspect the children in the film are contemplating some real life sorrow or slight or misdeed in their prayer meetings, and that the approach is to teach them to deal with the challenges of life in a highly aroused emotional state. After witnessing this, one is left wondering how these children are going to handle real difficulties in their lives.

While UU and Ethical Culture Sunday Schools do not deny the reality or validity of emotions, we do recognize the danger of personally being ruled by one's emotions and the greater societal harm this lack of rationality can bring to our shared decisions as citizens. The concern of addressing children's emotional needs was central to the work of the seminal religious educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs. Having been described as the person who effected the revolution that Channing only announced,<sup>7</sup> her work was monumental and is still extremely influential.

Attending to the thoughts, wonderings and concerns of the child was central to Fahs' work. Ultimately, she saw children's worship as a time where children could seriously ask any question about thoughts or experiences. Her goal was to invite children into the understanding that religion was the place where people of all times explored their thoughts and feelings about existential questions. As a result of placing these personal questions into a universal context, the child would, "become more understanding, more sensitive emotionally, and more able to feel empathy toward others."<sup>8</sup> A mature understanding of one's emotions can become a humanizing understanding of all peoples, as opposed to the emotions based in fear that dominate the teaching in *Jesus Camp*. One way leads to a greater understanding and appreciation of the world, and the other hinders such understanding, and promotes an isolationist view and sense of being victimized by others.

There is one thing missing from the children's chapel sessions in the movie that is rather surprising—stories. Certainly one would think that a ministry that believes "the Bible in its entirety to be the inspired Word of God and . . . our infallible guide of faith and conduct"<sup>9</sup> would use parables and stories in homilies for children, but telling stories is not the practice of Becky Fischer. Rather, she uses object lessons (concrete illustrations of a particular point). I think it is a deliberate decision by Fischer to stay away from narratives, because stories promote nuanced thinking and intellectual inquiry not directed by categorical pronouncements. These children are being educated in a manner that does not promote and/or inhibits metaphorical thinking.

### **Non-Metaphorical Thinking**

*Metaphorical thinking* includes the ability to use literature as an entry to contemplate the human condition and thus one's personal condition. The use of stories is central to religious education programs in the liberal tradition. Stories, myths, and legends are subtle, and the listener can go in a different direction than the teller intends. Ms. Fischer employs object lessons when preaching to the children in order to control the message. She has indicated elsewhere that she does not consider details of stories in the Bible to be the most important point of Sunday School. She is aware that stories can be presented in a dull manner that emphasizes memorization of minute details and therefore make religion seem dull and a petrified part of the past.<sup>10</sup> In her zeal to educate children to be Christian soldiers who will preserve the world for their faith, she regards literature as less than helpful.

The use of stories has long been important in Unitarian Sunday Schools; under the influence of Sophia Lyon Fahs, it expanded to include literature from around the world. This served to introduce children to not only specifically religious writings outside their tradition, but also to the vast array of secular wisdom stories from around the world. These stories implicitly illustrated the point that peoples in all stations of life have addressed thoughts and wonderings about all sorts of issues. This is ultimately a democratizing lesson.

In today's classroom in a UU or Ethical Society Sunday School, one will find a wide array of literature in use. From Bible stories to Jataka tales to secular children's authors like Eric Carle and Charlotte Zolotow, our classes are filled with stories offered to liven the imagination, and as Fahs stated, "not to teach moral lessons but to portray problematic situations where there [are] several possible solutions and a choice [has] to be made between what [is] more desirable and what [is] less so, neither being ideal."<sup>11</sup> Fahs articulates here what is so clearly *dangerous* about the use of literature—there may not be one "good" answer to a situation. When one is building a ministry with the purpose of eradicating all doubt, literature (even what would be considered sacred literature) is way too dangerous.<sup>12</sup>

### **Areas of Concern**

While tolerance and understanding are desired values in the reality of a multi-cultural world, this does not mean endorsing or supporting manipulation, which hinders the educational and emotional maturity of children. The educational process exhibited in this film:

**Inhibits a Sense of Ethics** in children. They are not educated to think through issues or dilemmas (or even exposed to them) even though their scripture is rich with them. The irony is that it is an articulated motive of the parents of these children to raise them in an environment that is concerned with morals and character education. But in a culture that promotes emotional responses over reason and fear over understanding, children are being robbed of the chance to enhance their moral reasoning skills.

**Promotes Submission to Authoritarianism.** These children are encouraged to respond with extreme emotions to their existential fears; they are not being equipped to rationally analyze their reactions to the world. This stunts their ability to think judiciously and furthers their dependence upon others to supply answers. This submissive quality makes them easy targets for manipulation by cynical politicians. It is hard to not see the importance of a citizenry that is capable of clear and rational decision making for the future of our democratic institutions.

**Further the Creation of Two Separate Societies** in this country. The inherent message exhibited by the adults in this film is that it is not possible for them to fully live their lives in modern day society. This message is strongly communicated explicitly and implicitly to the children of the film. *Jesus Camp* depicts adults who feel assaulted by the modern world and challenged at every turn. As parents, their response is to withdraw their children from what they find to be a troubling world. They home-school their children (while there are many reasons to do so, one of them can be to exert intellectual control over material that may challenge your world view) where they are free to teach their children Intelligent Design, that global warming is not happening and that Galileo gave up science for Christ. While it is easy to point out the absurdities of these teachings, it is a real concern on two levels:

1. The functioning of a democratic society relies on a reasoned citizenry who are making decisions based on fact, and
2. Can a society sustain many separate and isolated communities and still be a coherent whole?

Our country has always had and tolerated those groups who have decided to separate themselves from the larger society—the Amish come to mind as the clearest example of a group who have maintained a life that is quite separate from the society familiar to most Americans.<sup>13</sup>

After watching *Jesus Camp* one has to wonder how far this separation can go before we are a set of *de facto* separate nations. The people in this film are already substantially isolated from the diversity that animates much of the country—they reside in far flung suburbs or rural settings which are predominantly populated by people of white European descent, their children are home-schooled, and in choosing a summer camp for their children they choose one that espouses extreme Christian doctrine over a mainstream camp that has its roots in and still promotes the social values of Christianity such as a YMCA camp.

As the children in this film grow into adulthood with the view that world is a fearful place that wants to victimize them, it is hard to see that they will become fully rounded individuals and citizens participating in the market place of ideas and the art of political/governing compromise that is necessary to a pluralistic society.

### **Action**

There is value in articulating differences that humanists have with the means and message displayed in the film *Jesus Camp*, but ultimately one needs to decide whether those differences are of a significant nature. In my estimation, the methods exhibited in *Jesus Camp* require a response. Concern for the individuals in the film and for the consequences to the larger society must motivate us to not only educate ourselves about programs like Kids on Fire, but also to act. Many writers have raised alarm bells about religious zealotry in our society, and I am not aware of anyone who has the single answer on how to address this societal trend. I offer these thoughts:

**Advocate for Children.** Support programs for children that offer a healthy and progressive agenda: Head Start, YMCA and YWCA youth leadership groups, team sports or community arts groups give children an opportunity to learn alongside others, across social and economic boundaries. Children need a chance to explore the diversity of the world beyond their own families—not become isolated from it.

**Support Our Institutions and Religious Education Programs.** We humanists are a highly individualistic group of people. Joining secular discussion groups or liberal religious congregations can often be viewed as superfluous to our needs. The vibrancy and vitality of our organizations is extremely important if we are to offer a societal counterpoint to the church and religious education programs that emulate *Jesus Camp*. This also means making a financial commitment to our religious education programs, which are traditionally woefully under-funded.

**Support Liberal Christian Alternatives.** I do not see many families like those whose children appear in this film, changing their attitudes because of logical arguments and suddenly sending their children to humanist Sunday Schools and camps. The liberal Christian voice that shares many of our values and concerns needs to strongly offer itself as an alternative for which these families would feel an affinity and comfort. We should build alliances in areas of public policy and social justice with liberal Christian institutions when possible. This is a difficult stance for many humanists because it seems to involve compromising on basic understandings of the world; yet, a pluralistic society requires mutual support among its various groups, and not the separatism illustrated in this film.

## Notes

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1. [www.kidsinministry.com](http://www.kidsinministry.com)
2. Excerpt from William Ellery Channing's, *The Sunday-School*, 1837.
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3. Rhema Ministerial Association International web site: [www.rhema.org](http://www.rhema.org)
4. For more information about criticisms of the Word of Faith movement you can see a sampling of essays at the web site of the Apologetics Coordination Team: [www.deceptioninthechurch.com](http://www.deceptioninthechurch.com)
5. *The Sunday-School*.
6. Roberta M. Nelson (editor), *Claiming the Past, Shaping the Future – Four Eras in Liberal Religious Education 1790-1999*, Liberal Religious Educators Association, 2006, p. 26.
7. Adults and children alike routinely practice speaking in tongues in the film. There is a certain casualness about the practice (startling to the non-initiated) that apparently is characteristic of Word of Life adherents. The children engage in this practice in moments of high emotionalism, but the adults, like Fischer, can slip in and out of it at a moments notice. Whatever this behavior actually is, it would appear to certainly be learned and, in actuality, of little use in communicating to adherents and non-adherents alike. Seeing the children in the film engage in this behavior just reinforces the sense that their behavior is being manipulated to reinforce the idea that they have a knowledge that separates them from others.
8. *Claiming the Past*, p. 37.
9. Sophia Lyon Fahs, *Worshipping Together With Questioning Minds*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1965, p.17.
10. [www.kidsinministry.com](http://www.kidsinministry.com)
11. Becky Fischer, *Redefining Children's Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (First Chapter is available on-line at [www.kidsinministry.com](http://www.kidsinministry.com))
12. *Worshipping Together With Questioning Minds*, p. 16.

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13. I do not mean this passage on the use of literature to be taken as meaning that all Christian education has abandoned the use of story. There is very interesting work being done in the use of storytelling by people such as the Christian educator Jerome W. Berryman. His work has recently been adapted for use in Unitarian Universalist congregations Rev. Nita Penfold with her curriculum, *Spirit Play*. In addition, author Karen Armstrong in her book *A Short History of Myth* notes that modern populations have lost the ability to “think mythically,” which is akin to what I have called metaphorical thinking. Her reflection ends with the observation that, “A novel, like a myth, teaches us to see the world differently; it shows us how to look into our own hearts and to see our world from a perspective that goes beyond our own self-interest.” Again, not a direction that interests Ms. Fischer.
14. (Examples of groups that were intentionally separated from the majority population such as Native Americans to Reservations and African-Americans who are red-lined to certain neighborhoods do not apply in this analysis since the separation was/is something being done to them by a dominant social group.)