

“Sophia Fahs  
and Unitarian Universalist Religious Education”  
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Ninety percent of Unitarian Universalists grow up in other denominations and join our churches after they become adults. Often I find myself sitting among a group of religious liberals listening to complaints about early church experiences.

One man might say: “The minister taught me to love Jesus, to fear God, and to distrust everyone who did not attend our church.”

“I remember the day I was confirmed,” says another. “I was nine years old. I had picked up the idea in church school that something was supposed to happen. I expected to hear God’s voice or see a shining light, or feel uplifted, or something. Nothing happened. I felt like I had failed God.”

“My Sunday School classes were lectures,” says another. “Most of the time I could not understand what the teacher was saying. They would give us candy in exchange for memorizing Bible verses.”

When I hear comments like these, I think of my own religious upbringing:

In the second grade at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Phoenix we read the story of Joseph and his robe of many colors. We drew pictures of Joseph and we talked about jealousy between brothers and sisters.

Another year we read a story about a pharaoh of Egypt named Akhenaton. We talked about how he had proposed the radical new idea of monotheism to the people of Egypt.

Another year we spent many weeks studying the beliefs of different religious denominations. They called the program “The Church Across the Street.” One week we would talk about a denomination and the next week we would visit that church.

Still, I do not recall anything traumatic about church school. I am afraid I cannot blame any problems I have as an adult on my early experiences in Sunday School.

When I was growing up, I took my church school program for granted. As I talk with persons raised in other denominations, I become more aware that the experience I had in religious education was an unusual one. I owe its existence to several dedicated, highly creative persons who devised the curriculum I studied — led by a woman who served as Editor of Children’s Materials for the American Unitarian Association from 1937 until 1965. Her name was Sophia Lyon Fahs. Because the education of our children is so important, I want to talk about Sophia Fahs this morning. John has agreed to help me this morning by reading Sophia Fahs own words at appropriate points in this sermon. (I know that John does not look like Sophia Fahs, but I ask you to use your imagination.)

She was born August 2, 1876 in Hangchow, China. Her mother was a school teacher. Her father was a Presbyterian missionary. They were caught up in the great evangelical enthusiasm that characterized much of American Protestantism in the last quarter of the 19th century.

When Sophia was three and a half years old, the family returned from their mission post in China to Wooster, Ohio. In Ohio Sophia’s family gave her a solid foundation in 19th century Midwestern protestant

piety. Every Sunday the family would attend church in the morning, in the afternoon play Bible games, and read aloud to each other stories from missionary publications. During the rest of the week, they said daily prayers and read from the Bible.

In 1893 Sophia graduated from Wooster High School and entered Wooster College. She was active in the YWCA and, as was usual with serious young Christians of the period, she frequently stood up in public meetings to acknowledge her own sinfulness and promised to surrender herself wholly to Christ.

After college, when she was twenty-four and twenty-five, she worked as a traveling secretary for an organization called the Student Volunteer Movement. Her job was to visit college campuses and try to convince young students to sign the Student Volunteer Pledge by which they promised to give their lives to the cause of Christian missions.

In 1902, she married Charles Fahs, a young Methodist minister who was the general editor of a magazine called *World Wide Missions*. She moved to New York City to set up a household and raise a family. It was not an auspicious beginning for a woman who was to revolutionize the religious education program of the most liberal denomination in America.

In New York City, she began to take courses in a new field called educational psychology. She began to study a new philosophy of education being taught by John Dewey. She found herself excited by the new philosophy of education being taught at Columbia University.

However, most of her energy from 1903 until 1923 went toward raising a family. It was not an easy job. In 1904 her first child, Dorothy, was born. In 1907 a second girl was born, named Ruth. In 1908 a boy named Burton was born. In 1913 a third girl was born but died four months after its birth of pneumonia. A month later four-year-old Burton developed spinal meningitis, and was in the hospital for six weeks. Six weeks later, he came down with bronchitis and his sister Sophia took Dorothy to the hospital for an appendix operation. In the summer of that year, Mrs. Fahs gave birth to a fifth child, Lois. This was followed by two tonsillectomies, and appendix operation for Burton and a diagnosis of chorea for Dorothy.

In the fall of 1920, 13-year-old Ruth came down with an illness diagnosed as infantile paralysis. She died within four days. Listen to how Sophia Fahs described the experience:

**JOHN** One cannot live through such an experience without being profoundly different ever after. We felt shattered because of Ruth's short life, so exuberant and promising, cut down. From then on, no religion could inspire that did not include sorrow and tragedy. Life had no special protective privilege to grant to anyone. Had it not been for this personal tragedy, I would never have had the courage, I believe, to think of putting the word "death" on the title page of a children's book.

By 1923 after all these experiences, Sophia Fahs had done her apprenticeship in working with children. In the fall of 1923, she entered Union Theological Seminary as a candidate for the Bachelor of Divinity degree. She wrote her mother:

**JOHN** My purpose in doing this is to get a through going training for work in religious education. If I work as a director, I need to have the advantage of an equal standing with the pastor in the church. If I should take a little community church someday myself, then I could organize the church on a democratic basis and we could together work out an entirely new program of church activities in which preaching would be merely an occasional feature

of the program. At any rate, I am starting out on the adventure at the age of forty-seven.

She graduated from Union Theological Seminary in 1926. A year later Union asked her to become a lecturer in Religious Education. She was one of the first women to join the faculty of the seminary. Listen to Sophia Fahs' philosophy of Religious Education in her own words:

**JOHN** Trust the child. Honor his integrity as an individual. In all his relationships expect him to grow and as he grows, recognize the process as religious. Make it necessary for him to be resourceful and independent. Count on his doing his own exploring. Teach him how to be open minded and yet not to be as "a reed shaken by the wind." Finally, have fellowship with him in experiences of appreciation of the wonder and beauty and sacredness of life.

Sophia Fahs had come a long way in twenty-five years. Through her exposure to John Dewey's ideas of progressive education and through her hard earned experience in raising a family, she had let go of her early beliefs and replaced them with a deep, sensitive understanding of the nature of children and religion. Mrs. Fahs was suggesting changes not only in the way adults were teaching religion to children but also in content. She argued in her classes and in printed articles against teaching the idea of God to children under the age of eight. She asked:

**JOHN** What happens, when a person becomes fixed in his attitude toward God because as a child he was given a picture of God adopted to his childish experiences (at a period of life when he was wholly dependent on an earthly father), and was given it as the one right and true way of conceiving of God?

In answer to her own question, Fahs said that such an approach to religious education encourages children to remain dependent and helpless. When people raised in this way become adults and have harsh experiences—the loss of a child or a spouse, a serious battle with sickness, or economic hardship—they discover the picture of reality their parents and teachers gave them as a child was false. If such persons wish to grow up emotionally and intellectually, they must throw off their childish religion. Sophia Fahs concluded:

**JOHN** Until a child has had some experience, which awakens in him a bit of this wondering after the mystery of life, . . . the word "God" is best left out of the picture.

To many this was a shocking suggestion. In 1928, a minister named Reinhold Niebuhr attended a conference where Sophia Fahs spoke. Niebuhr wrote: "This conference on religious education seems to your humble servant the last word in absurdity. We are told by a delightful "expert" that we ought not really teach children about God lest we rob them of the opportunity of making their own discovery of God and lest we corrupt their young minds by our own superstitions."

Sophia Fahs' pursuit of religious truth had led her in her fifties to the radical fringe of American religion. She was ready for Unitarianism and coincidentally Unitarianism was in dire need of leadership in religious education.

Between 1916 and 1935, the membership in Unitarian Churches had shrunk from 80,000 to 50,000. Because of the depression, Unitarian leaders had made many cuts in the budgets of churches and in the denominational staff. In 1934, the Unitarian Annual May Meeting formed a Commission of Appraisal to study the denomination and make recommendations to deal with this declining membership. The report of the Commission, completed in 1936, stated that the "Unitarian Church of the future will insist that the entire

church program shall be redefined in terms of education.” The Commission lamented that “Today there are many churches carrying orthodox labels that are doing far more important work in this field than any Unitarian Church.” The denomination gave the unfortunate impression that it did “not take seriously the education of its children.”

Within a year after the American Unitarian Association published this report, the Association president hired Sophia Fahs in a part-time position of Editor of Children’s Materials. She was sixty-one years old. She brought to her new position a lifetime concern with both the theory and practice of religious education and the rich accomplishment in three phases of the work: writing, teaching of children and teaching of adults.

In the next twenty-four years, despite frequent budget cuts, a steady flow of materials on religious education came from her office. She wrote some. Others wrote many more with her help and encouragement. Between 1935 and 1965, the membership in Unitarian Sunday Schools grew from 17,000 students to 89,000 students, an increase of more than 500%. When in the 1940s and 50s young parents began coming in increasing numbers to Unitarian churches looking for a religious education for their children, they found something special.

Rev. Dale DeWitt, who served as a district executive from 1939 to 1964, described this process of growth in a letter to Sophia Fahs. Listen while John reads a part of Dale DeWitt’s letter to Sophia Fahs:

**JOHN** I have been in a special box seat about this. I saw your work come into being in the churches and among the teachers and leaders who came every June to our summer conference. I watched their hesitations, their doubts, their frustrations as they faced a new approach and new materials. The earlier conferences were often protests, questioning and discouragement as the teachers tried to grasp a truly demanding task. But year after year a change could be seen. We became aware that our religious education people were catching onto the fact that a dynamic process was what counted in children’s lives, not a static achievement. Gradually, frustration changed to interest and excitement. Criticism turned to acceptance, enthusiasm emerged so that one could see the evidences of delight among those who were making the programs work in their churches and who were glad to share their understanding.

In 1959, the members of Cedar Lane Unitarian Church in Bethesda, Maryland ordained Sophia Fahs. She was eighty-two years old when she became a minister. In 1964, she retired from her position as Editor of Children’s Materials for the newly merged Unitarian Universalist Association. She was eighty-eight years old at the time. In 1978 the Rev. Sophia Fahs died, just short of her one hundred and second birthday.

Today in this church, we continue the progressive liberal religious education that Sophia Fahs developed. I can still remember the volunteer teachers that worked with me when I was a child in the Unitarian Universalist church in which I grew up. They made an important, positive difference in my life. I invite each of you to think back into your childhood and remember a teacher, perhaps a teacher in a religious community, who made an important, positive influence in your life.

Holding that memory in your hearts, I invite you to join with me in passing on that experience to the next generation of children.