

THE FLAPPER AS A RELIGIOUS FORCE

SCORNED FOR LONG BY CHURCHMEN as an ambulatory example of folly, the flapper at length finds herself defended by the Church. She is not, in this new view, the brainless, overdressed Jezebel that she has been pictured to be. "She is a symbol of the times. As she sweeps down the street, she is like nothing so much as a fine, young, spirited puppy-dog, eager for the fray." The simile is uttered in all seriousness, for Dr. William E. Gardner, Secretary of the department of religious education of the Episcopal Church, believes that we are standing "in the presence of one of the great youth movements of history." The "moral breakdown" of which there has been so much talk is nothing more than a repetition of history, says Dr. Gardner, recalling that similar charges have been made against other generations growing up. So "we do wrong to condemn youth, to decry it, to suspect it." As he is further quoted in the *New York Times*, Dr. Gardner believes that there is in the youth of to-day "a sincerity of purpose and a will and a determination to do good that has not been surpassed in any period of the world's history. Boys and girls to-day—yes, even the flapper—want to be right, and they know they can not be right unless they connect with power." The movement is toward, not away from, the Church. Among the reasons for the "spontaneous turning of youth toward the Church" Dr. Gardner places first the problems raised by the new ideals of equality and especially equality of the sexes. "In that problem of equality, in that great struggle that we are now entering, to find authority without inferiority, to maintain equality without the sacrifice of individuality, the youth of the land knows well that the religion of Jesus Christ has sure help toward the solution." The second reason is the desire for a high standard of recreation and pleasure. The movement "intends to restore some of the joy and cheerfulness that have been taken out of Christianity." "To be good and not know it to some Christians would not be goodness. Most Christians all over the world, and especially if they come from New England, have a conscientious feeling that unless goodness is accompanied by a due amount of discomfort it is not goodness." But the youth of to-day has, we are told, repudiated this idea. "He is fed us with a life of goodness that is maintained by bars and rules and commands. He will tell you that all these develop self-consciousness and self-consciousness means discontent." A third reason for the youth movement in the Church is "the unfettering of religious knowledge"—by some termed "modernism." With the ordinary boy and girl to-day there is ceaseless questioning about everything, and religion, "the greatest subject that man can investigate," does not escape. Dr. Gardner observed that—

"Boys and girls are becoming conscious that ideas, customs, and traditions have a past just like anything else. The Bible, with its stories of Creation, the Flood, Jonah and the Whale, is a fascinating field in which the youth of to-day may exercise his curiosity and his inquisitiveness. He hasn't any of the feeling of danger that you and I had (and still may have) if the idea was proposed that we ask questions about the story of Jonah and the Whale.

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"The ways of thinking on the Bible and religion are unfettered and there are signs that we shall have a rush, like those of the gold-mining days, of youthful intellect toward the most fruitful and least-known field of human thought, the field of religion.

"The genius of religion is that it must be conserved and passed on to the next generation. The genius of youth is that it must adapt that religion to its own needs, if there is to be growth in truth.

"The reinterpretation of religion is much needed to-day. It is no new situation in history. Whenever doctrines or religious customs can not be interpreted to hold the interest of youth, the end of those doctrines and customs is in sight. If they have no vital truth they become side eddies in the stream of human interest. If they have vital truth, youth finds it and clothes it in new phrases and figures and stories, and makes it an asset in human endeavor. The turning of youth toward the Church—the seeking of its message of power for right—is creating a second reformation in religious thinking. There is no Luther nailing questions to the church door. Instead, there is a youth movement in religion. Our boys and girls will cause changes in the Church's ideas and teachings more radical than those of the Protestant reformation.

"Youth is searching for the power that Christianity has always had, the power that can be applied every day. More than ever to-day youth detests selfishness, injustice and war of every kind. The young do not think so much about the wrong and evil in these things as we do; they think they are foolish and unnecessary curses.

"The youth of the world to-day are hunting for truth more than they were twenty years ago, and they are interested in non-material objectives of life because world events compel them to that kind of an interest. Most of the inhabited parts of the world are explored. The adventures of life are no longer in discovering countries. The adventures of the future, youth knows, are in the realm of ideas. Every boy and every girl with ambition knows that success depends more on morals and mind than on muscle.

"Everywhere boys and girls are looking for spiritual power. They may call it by different names, but they seek spiritual power. They will find the power they need in religion where mankind has found it throughout the ages."

"A fig for the crusade!" exclaims the *Portland Oregonian*, in setting down its disgust at the idea that one can see "in the bizarre customs and conduct of American youth a hope for the future." What Dr. Gardner believes, says this journal, is "not conducive either to progress or reform."

"The fact is that the sound thinking of the world has never been the product of youth, aside from an occasional and luminous genius. Old men for council, and young men for war. It would appear self-evident that our youthful theorists, scarcely able as yet to cope with the business of earning their way through the world, are not to be trusted with the rather particular matter of moral revolution. The conventions restrain and irritate them. They assail the conventions as stupid and tyrannical, the product of a primitive state of society. A dozen years from now these same flaming young reformers of to-day, their zeal somewhat abated, will have taken glad refuge in the conventions, as a wanderer welcomes a roof and a fireside. Confident of this, even their severest critics have minimized the peril of their recalcitrant opinions."