

THE THEOLOGICAL LIFE OF A CALIFORNIA CHILD.

BY PROF. EARL BARNES, OF LELAND STANFORD JUNIOR UNIVERSITY,
CALIFORNIA

THIS study is not intended in any sense as an inquiry into the child's religious life and feeling. It is intended simply to show the theological atmosphere in which California children live, and their mental attitude toward their theology at different ages.

The materials on which the study is based are :

I. One thousand and ninety-one compositions written by children from six to twenty years old in the various schools of California, on the subjects of heaven and hell. They were simply given the subjects and asked to write compositions in the presence of their teachers without suggestion or comment.

II. Sixteen reminiscences prepared by adults, in which they tried simply to recall and state their early beliefs.

III. Twenty-seven studies on young children made by mothers and teachers through conversations, working along the lines of this syllabus :

God—Where is He? What does He do? Why can not we see Him?

Death—Why do people die? Where do they go?

Heaven—Where is it? Who goes there? What do people do there? What will children have there?

Hell—What must a person do to go there? What is it like?

Angels—What do they do?

Ghosts—Why are people afraid of them?

Witches—What can they do?

Prayer—Why do we pray? What do we pray for? Why do we not always get what we pray for?

Religious ceremonies—Why do we celebrate Christmas? Why do we go to church?

Every variety of faith was represented in the papers — Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Universalists, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Baptists, Adventists, and Spiritualists. With only two or three exceptions the children treated the questions seriously, and the papers bear internal evidence of honest effort to express the truth.

The data were collated in the following groups :

God, His appearance and activities.

The devil, his appearance and activities.

Heaven, its location, its inhabitants, and their appearance and activities.

Hell, its location, its inhabitants, and their appearance and activities.

Indications of a critical attitude ; acts which take people to heaven ; acts which keep them out of heaven.

Since the children were not answering any set questions, we cannot state what proportion accepted any particular idea, but only how many of the children who mentioned an idea accepted or rejected it.

In studying the data an attempt was first made to bring together the theological conceptions expressed in the compositions, and then to determine the attitude of the children toward these conceptions.

The central figure in the theology is naturally God. The pictures drawn of Him are often misty and indistinct, but more than half the papers represent Him as a great and good man. He is so large that "He could stand with His feet on the ground and touch the clouds with His arms upraised." "He is a man that has