

Some at least among the law-makers beyond the Tasman Sea have grown weary of the wiles and frauds of the parasitic tribe who fatten upon the cagerness of our kind to pierce the veil that hides the future from our eyes. Judging by a paragraph in an Australian contemporary, there are big possibilities of coming tribulation in Victoria for palmists, fortune-tellers, astro-mathematicians, and the rest of the strangely-named tribe who

'Make fools believe in their foreseeing
Of things before they are in being,
To swallow gudgeons ere they're caught,
And count their chickens ere they're hatched. . .
But still the best for him that gives
The best price for 't, or best believes.'

'A Bill is being introduced,' says our contemporary, 'into the Victorian State Parliament, which provides that the offender shall be liable to a fine of £100, or to twelve months' imprisonment.'

Penalties of such severity would probably defeat their own purpose. But something effective should nevertheless be done to protect the public from this class of fraud, and to deter the secular press from being—as it has long been—the sounding-board of this school of cheats and charlatans. Some of the papers that we wot of publish from time to time articles from sciolist quackheads and callow theorists, denouncing as superstitious the deepest things of true science and faith and philosophy. Some of their theories—which they mistake for the proven findings of science—would cut away the basis of all religion and morality and social order. But side by side with this far-resounding clash of shallow fallacy and German-gilt falsehood, the daily papers print the vulgar and clamorous advertisements of the futurist, the astro-mathematician, and the clairvoyant. They pocket the impostors' fees (generally pre-paid, as a matter of precaution), and help them to fleece a public that is in great part superstitious. Without the aid of the newspaper press, the ranks of the soothsayers would be speedily thinned. The press—the boast of our century—is their chief ally, and the principal means of propagating this form of superstition and chicanery.

The Clothes of Religion

The Bible-in-schools leaders are lightning-change artists—somewhat after the style of the late Fred Maccabe and Charles Duval, but far less entertaining in their antics. Within the past six months they have shed their stage costume several times. Their latest bow to a New Zealand audience was made in 'an emasculated caricature' of the Protestant version of the Bible, to be used as a mere literary text-book, with the erstwhile indispensable 'ethical explanations' carefully docked, and the hacked and mutilated Sacred Text used as a peg on which to hang up instructions in grammar and geography. The good men propose to destroy all reverence for Christianity—by cutting out its most sacred Mysteries and throwing them over the fence; for Religion, by reducing it to a mere empty and sentimental philosophy; for the Bible, by placing it on a par with 'Robinson Crusoe' or the Fifth Reader, or, at best, with profane writings such as the plays of Shakespeare or the poems of Tennyson. They degrade the Bible in the eyes of children by leading them to believe that its chief use and function is to teach geography and grammar, and that it is to be read without any attempt at a real explanation or understanding of its contents, which is impossible without entering upon the domain of religion. So far as their proposals go, they would give the children in the schools, not the nourishing bread of faith, but the hard, dry stone of scepticism, and a creed which would be too meagre and foggy to satisfy even a Tom Paine or a Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Now, religion is no mere sentiment. Its very essence is belief and trust. These, and the foundation

facts and realities which call them forth, form no part of the procession of shifting schemes that are evolved in the brain of the Bible-in-schools League. The essence of religion they throw aside. The fantastic Thing which they set up in its place, they drape with the clothes of religion: they cling to phrases; they prescribe emotions; they even insist upon a ritual formula. But they forget that, without the positive and definitive religious teaching that is back of the formula, it is as unmeaning as Mr Harrison's appeal to the Unknowable. Wilfrid Ward, in one of his writings, gets the rawhide around the shoulders of those Positivists who, like the authors of the latest Bible-in-schools scheme, reject the realities of religion and retain its clothes. 'It would,' said he, 'be more becoming in them to bury it, clothes and all, and give forth a sigh over its grave, as Schopenhauer did, than to keep its clothes as perquisites wherewith to array their own children. The former is, at all events, the ordinary procedure of civilised warfare; the latter is rather suggestive of the hangman.'

Schools: A Contrast

In a work of his on liberty of teaching, published in 1865, Isaac Butt laid down this golden maxim of statecraft: 'Institutions are made for the people, not the people for institutions.' English Conservative newspapers, like Russell Lowell's pious editor, believe in the application of this principle 'ez far away ez Paris is'—in Sweden and Poland and Bulgaria and Macedonia. But they get a fit of the megrims at the thought of getting it into operation in their own little Poland—to wit, in holy Ireland, where the grass grows green. This is particularly the case with the so-called 'National' system of education, which, like its predecessors of more unsavory memory, was originally devised for the purpose of de-nationalising the rising generation, weaning them from the faith of their fathers, and turning them into West Britons with a patois of thickened d's. Here is a hymn that the little budding Irish boys and girls were required to recite day by day, beginning with 1838:—

'I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my birth have smiled,
And made me in these Christian days
A happy English child.'

The little Mauryas and Paudrigs of those days were (says Dr. O'Riordan) 'brought up under un-Catholic influences, and were trained to think of Ireland as a western province of England, with no more national individuality than an English shire.' But the system broke down, and in 1858, in the British House of Lords, its creator sorrowfully tar-branded it with the word 'Failure.'

From that day to the present, the miscalled 'National' system of education in Ireland has been one of wooden-headed muddling and scholastic quackery, in which the principle of adaptation to the traditions, needs, and aspirations of the country has had no part. 'I hope,' said the scholarly Rector of the Irish College, Rome, in a recent farewell speech in Ireland, 'we will keep insisting that Ireland is not England, and that the educational virtues which are thought best for England are not for that mere reason to be adapted for Ireland, and that the Irish people will refuse to put on the educational cast-offs which some of our educationalists bring across the Channel. If we are to judge from the action of some of our experts, the best recommendation we can have that a certain educational garment should become us for wear is that it has been measured for the back of Great Britain and proved a misfit.' Ruskin has said somewhere that the man who expresses a good thought in clear and pithy speech deserves better of his kind than he who makes two blades of grass spring up where only one had grown before. Dr. O'Riordan's neat 'sizing-up' of the blundering methods of the Irish Education Department is one of those happy epigrammatic sayings that are likely to endure and work.

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