

THE SECULAR PHASE OF OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

A DISCUSSION

(By the Editor of the *New Zealand Tablet*.)

XIII.—A REPLY TO CRITICISMS.

The following article on secular *versus* religious education appeared in last Saturday's issue of an esteemed contemporary, the *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin):—

The *Otago Daily Times* has been courteous enough to permit me to reply to criticisms of the series of articles in which, through its generosity, I was able to place before its readers what I conceive to be the Catholic position in regard to education. Ample time for criticism has elapsed, but thus far none has appeared deserving of more than passing notice except that which was contained in an editorial article in the *Otago Daily Times*—an article which represents everything that a discussion should be in dignity of tone and in kindliness of feeling.

At this stage it will be well to recall to mind the state of the discussion. The matter out of which it arose was an assertion of the Catholic position in regard to the necessity of religion in education. To this was united its sequel or corollary, an assertion of the Catholic claim in education (*Otago Daily Times*, December 22, 1908). The reply (December 23, 1908) asserted sundry objections to the Catholic claim, and (by implication) to the principles on which it is grounded. Next (December 31, 1908, and January 4, 1909), another subsidiary question was drawn into the vortex of discussion—namely, the argument from results, so far as the results of State and Catholic education may be deemed to be disclosed by sundry vices and by statistical returns of legal crime. When the columns of the *Otago Daily Times* were chivalrously opened to my contributions I followed on the lines traced by my predecessors in the discussion. I dealt with (I.) the secular *versus* the religious system in education—with the question of religion or no-religion in the school; (II.) with the question of results; and (III.) with the facts of the Catholic demand and the principle upon which it is based.

1. THE SECULAR VERSUS THE RELIGIOUS SYSTEM IN EDUCATION.—From the first it was clear that this was a discussion between Christian men. And both sides 'argued it out as sich.' With non-believers a different line of treatment would have been followed. On practically all hands—both among believers and unbelievers—education is looked upon as a preparation for life. But, obviously, the nature, purpose, and processes of this educational preparation for life cannot be determined until we have first decided what is the aim and purpose (or the chief aim and purpose) of life itself—what is the real life-object and destiny of the little budding men and maids whom the law forces into our schools. Christians—and many besides—stand on common ground in their common belief that the one great thing that matters in life—its chief end and aim—is to know and love and serve God here; that the crown of life and the completion of our being is the Beatific Vision of God hereafter; that all earthly life is intended as a training for this; that education is merely one (a juvenile) phase of that training; that the path to the attainment of our sublime destiny is that of duty fulfilled (which means virtue); and that the first and chiefest of our duties are those which we owe to our Creator—namely, the duties of religion. Religion is the thing that matters above all others in the life of the child as in the life of the adult, in the school as in the home. To quote Robert Browning's fine lines:

'Religion's all or nothing; it's no more smile
O' contentment, sigh or aspiration, sir—
No quality o' the fuelier tempered clay
Like its whiteness or its lightness; rather, stuff
O' the very stuff; life of life, and self of self.'

Christian history—and much of history as well which is not Christian—knows no kind of education but that which assigns the place of prime importance to religion and religious training. That system of education is geographically, as it is historically, in possession. And it must be deemed to be rightly in possession until the contrary is shown. The secular system excludes religion from education. It is comparatively new, localised, experimental; it comes to us as a legacy from the anti-Christian philosophy and the anti-Christian revolution of the eighteenth century. As a new and rival claimant for the possession of the world's schools, the burden of proof is upon it: it must show its title deeds, it must seek its justification in the only plea that has any force or relevancy here—namely, by an appeal to a philosophy of life, to the life-aim and destiny of the children whom it proposes to prepare

for the serious business of life. In one of his cleverest works, G. K. Chesterton illustrates a similar point by the following charmingly appropriate parable:

'Suppose that a great commotion arises in a street about, let us say, a lamp-post, which many influential people desire to pull down. A monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say in the arid manner of the Schoolmen: "Let us first of all, my brethren, consider the value of Light. If Light be in itself good . . ." At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmediæval practicability. But, as things go on, they do not work out so easily. Some people have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it was not enough of a lamp-post; some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, to-day, to-morrow, or the next day, there comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of light. Only, what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we must now discuss in the dark.'

'The monk was right after all.' We, too, have had our 'commotion' of lawmakers and others over the light of religion in the schools. Those who exhorted them to 'consider the value' of that light were (figuratively) knocked down. In a brief space legislators had extinguished the light—some for one reason, some for another. And the conviction is getting back, and showing itself in the action of school committees and in various other ways, 'that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of light'—what (in the present connection) is the philosophy of life, what is the true aim and destiny of the child, what is the rightful place which the guiding ray of religion should fill in the school, as in the home and in every phase of his earthly probation. It would have been interesting to have perused a defence of the exclusion of religion from the school life of the child, on this plea of Christian philosophy and revealed religion—the only plea on which a Christian defence of it can be set up. But it has not been attempted. Such contentions as have been advanced in its favor were based upon considerations quite apart from these. The problem of life and childhood was not faced as it is presented to us; eyes were shut to the most outstanding facts of the question; and wide conclusions were drawn upon a false and partial view. Hereunder are stated in summary terms the principal pleas advanced for the banishment of religion from the schools:

1. 'The civil Government is not competent to teach religion.'—Granted. But it does not follow that religion must therefore be excluded from the schools. This argument wrongly assumes: (a) That the Government has sole, supreme, and exclusive control of the whole course of education; (b) that the Government is morally entitled to exclude from the course of education everything which it is not competent to teach; (c) that the exclusion of religion from the school is a means of educating—that is, of promoting the true life-aim and supernatural destiny of the child. But these contentions are to be proved, not to be assumed. Christian principles of education, which have been in immemorial possession, stamp such an interference by the Government as beyond its true rights, and a grievous wrong upon the child. This whole question was treated in detail in the sixth article of this series.

2. The different denominations (we are told) have not agreed among themselves as to the kind and quantity of religion to be imparted in the school. Religion had, therefore, to be excluded by the Government from the schools, in the interests of educational peace.—This argument wrongly assumes (a) the moral right of any Government to exclude religion from the process of education. But this is the very thing which is denied, and which the supporters of the secular system have to prove. (b) It assumes likewise that such exclusion of religion from the school promotes the true life-aim and sublime destiny of the child. (c) It assumes that no-religion is the only feasible 'solution' of a difference of opinion among religious people as to the quantity and kind of religion that should be taught in the schools. In a speech delivered at Liverpool on April 5, 1872, the late Marquis of Salisbury smote those who tell parents 'that, because there is a difference amongst those who desire to be their teachers as to what form of religion they shall be taught, they shall be taught no religion at all.' That (added he) 'seems to be the most grotesque form of tyranny that can be devised. It is just as bad as if a starving man were to apply to

'Oor Sandy wis eye girnin' aboot his tea till I gied him Cock o' the North. Eh! but he's pleased noo!'

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