

Notes

A Bible-in-schools Circular

For some time past the Wellington Citizens' Bible-in-schools League has been zealously supplying the public with odd scraps and snippets of misinformation that are, no doubt, well-meant and unintentional. Last week the League sent out to the newspaper press of the Colony a statement of the various countries in which Biblical knowledge is imparted in public schools. The statement is said to have been received 'from kindred societies in various parts of the world'. Some of the information thus received by the League might advantageously have been a good deal 'more so'. The misinformation consists, as a rule, rather in the things that are suggested or left unsaid than in the statements that are positively made. For instance, immediately after a statement in regard to the use of the Bible in the schools in Germany, we find this delightful bit of bland simplicity: 'Moral instruction is given in' (the public schools of) 'France for three hours per week'. And this French official 'moral instruction' is used to point a moral against the 'purely secular' system that prevails in New Zealand. In all the circumstances, at least nineteen out of every twenty readers would infer this: that, according to the League's circular, the 'moral instruction' imparted in the French State schools is of a biblical or at least theistic character. As a matter of notorious fact, the so-called French 'moral instruction' which the League holds up as an example to New Zealand is, at its very best, the mere godless 'morale civique'; at its worst, it is open, rampant, and aggressive atheism. Has the Wellington Citizens' Bible-in-schools League been asleep or in a trance since 1901? And if not, how comes it to be unaware of the savage war of extermination which the atheistic French Government has been carrying on against all schools (including even the ecclesiastical seminaries) in which theistic 'moral instruction' was imparted to youth? And is not the League aware that the very name of God has been officially erased not alone from the coinage of France, but also from every text-book that is used in its schools? Nay more, does it not know that the official 'Gazette des Instituteurs' ('Teachers' Gazette') is blistered (as a writer in the 'Saturday Review' pointed out recently) with articles and suggestions for rooting the idea of God and belief in Christian faith and principles out of the minds of the youth of France? We Catholics show our dislike of the hard secularism of our system of public instruction in a much more convincing and practical way than any of the various Bible-in-schools associations that have risen, lived their brief day, and died before our eyes. But truly, the French public school system is a noble example for a League of Christian men and women to set up for New Zealand! Verily, abyss calleth to abyss.

But that is by no means the only misleading feature in the latest circular which the Wellington League has sent to the press. We find, for instance, much space devoted to Biblical instruction in the schools in England, Scotland, Canada, Austria, in Prussia, and throughout Germany generally. Was it a mere coincidence that the League forgot to mention that in each and every one of these countries, denominational systems of public instruction are in full force—systems which our New Zealand Bible-in-schools Leagues love about as much as they do the bubonic plague? We are likewise informed that the Bible ('either Douay or Authorised Version') is 'read' in the national (public primary) schools of Ireland. This statement stands in need of repairs and alterations. And thereby hangs a tale often told in our columns, but which we venture to think our Wellington friends would not willingly place before the public of New Zealand. Here once more we bump up against the strange, passing strange reticences that mark the circu-

lar of the Wellington League. Why, for instance, were not the public informed that the great bulk of the national schools in Ireland are to all intents and purposes denominational—that they are frequented by Catholics exclusively or by Protestants exclusively, and that (subject to certain restrictions) they are used for the imparting of distinctively Catholic or of distinctively Protestant religious teaching? Thus, with the sanction of the Commissioners, there are in Ireland Catholic national schools, Anglican national schools, Presbyterian national schools, and even (as we understand) Methodist national schools. And the managers of these are almost invariably the clergymen of the various Churches which the schools are intended to serve. In the year 1900, there were in Ireland 8673 national schools. As many as 5585 of these (64.4 per cent. of the entire number) were de facto creedal schools—used for denominational as well as secular instruction by this or that religious body exclusively. The proportion is now much higher. Of the remaining 3088 schools, many were in 1900 practically denominational schools, being frequented only by one or two children representing the local religious minority—as, for instance, when a Protestant policeman with a family is sent from Ulster to an exclusively Catholic district in Mayo. Great Britain, Canada, Germany, Austria, etc., were held up by the League as examples and reproaches to New Zealand. But we have our suspicions that if the Wellington League got, for this Colony, the alternative of a tidal wave or of a system of denominational education such as prevails in the countries just named, they would pretty unanimously sprint for high ground and ask the Lord to send along the tidal wave. If herein we wrong them, we shall gladly make them an honorable amende.

The League's press circular gives a list of the States of the American Union in which 'the Bible' is taught in the public schools at the public expense. Glancing casually at it, the list seems like Hood's oyster—good in spots but here and there 'open to objection'—that is to explanation or revision. However, let that pass. It leads us to one or two more of the League's curious lapses of memory, or of the 'kindred societies' severe economy of information. We take the liberty of supplying three rather significant omissions. In the first place 'the Bible' referred to here by the League is a sectarian translation of the Good Book—to wit, the gravely erroneous Authorised Version. And we do not think that the Citizens' League propose to introduce that or any other sectarian version of the Scriptures into the public schools of New Zealand. In the second place, the gravest dissatisfaction prevails among large bodies of people in those States where one section of the community has secured, out of the public purse, a religious advantage that is in practice denied to others. And in the third place (as we showed some time ago) a searching and merciless boycott of Catholic teachers is notoriously carried on, by those in control of the appointments to public schools, in at least some of the States of the Union—and especially in the New England States—where Protestantism is endowed to the extent of having its version of the Scriptures taught by public officials at the public expense. We have merely touched upon a few of the more outstanding misrepresentations which—more by their reticences than by their direct statements—the Wellington Bible-in-schools League have sent broadcast through the Colony. There are a good many various ways of conveying a false impression. And one of the worst of these is the withholding of important facts bearing upon a case. The Wellington League should both test and revise and extend its information before it proceeds to enlighten New Zealand.

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