

Bible-reading in State Schools.

IN addressing the assemblage after the ceremony of blessing a new convent at Mount Barker a few Sundays ago, his Grace the Archbishop of Adelaide dealt with the proposal for the reading of the Bible in the public schools of the State. His Grace spoke in part as follows:—

The scheme for the reading of the Bible under the teacher's superintendence in State schools is a scheme vitiated by a triple defect. It is a scheme unwise, a scheme unworkable, and a scheme unjust. My words are strong, but their strength I think I can justify.

In the development by the teacher of the religious instincts of a child, two elements come into play. These elements are the text book used and the personality of the teacher who expounds it. To me, to all Catholics, the Bible is the very utterance of God. It is the message of the all-wise Creator to the creatures whom He has called into being, and with whom He has peopled this earth. That message comes to us, however, through various media, and was indited at various times to meet the varying needs of our ever varying humanity. The warning which suits one age may not be adapted to another. The encouragement or reproach, called for by the habits or surroundings of one people, may be out of place when addressed to a second. To make the Bible the foundation of belief is to the Catholic mind to open up the way to every hue and shade of religious opinion. Humanity, moreover, has its weaknesses. Men must confess that the history of their race furnishes some sad stories. Nor are all of these meet reading for the young. There are faults against which the aged and the adult have to be warned, and of which, nevertheless, not even mention must be made in the hearing of the child. The Bible deals with all ages, with all classes; I must add, with all crimes. I shall assuredly be not deemed to speak disrespectfully of God's Book if I say that the writings of which it is composed are intended for

The Edification Solely of that Class,

for whose edification each of those writings was penned. I refuse to believe—every Catholic refuses to believe—that the Bible in its integrity is a fitting handbook for the inculcation of religion to the young. I quote a heathen saying—but the heathens were sometimes wise, and had a grasp of the fundamental verities of moral law—'Supreme reverence is due to the child.' With all due respect for the honest opinions of those who differ from me, I am convinced that there are parts of the Bible which were never intended by its Divine Author that children should peruse.

My statement will be met, of course, by the counter-statement that it is not the Bible, but carefully selected passages from the Bible, that it is proposed should be placed in the hands of the children of the State. The plea ignores the second element in the equation. The beliefs, the views of the teacher who superintends the reading, must assuredly be reckoned with. It is no secret—I do no harm by asserting—that the inspiration of the Scriptures is no universal article of Australian faith. Teachers are no class apart. They share the opinions of other sections of the community. I do them no injustice—I am sure they will not accuse me of doing them an injustice—in saying that in all probability many of them do not believe in the inspiration of Holy Writ. People speak of the Bible as a handbook supplying samples of the highest type of poetry, of philosophy, of morality. I may not consider it merely as such. To me it is a revelation of the will of the Supreme Lawgiver. To me its ordinances are the highest law. Teachers may be fenced in by rule and regulation of the Education Department. They may be forbidden by Act of Parliament itself to comment on what is read. Nature will out. Children are quick of observation. A shrug, a shake of the head, a peculiarity in the tone of the voice made at the end of a quarter of an hour's reading may do more harm in the way of shaking children's simple, trustful faith in God's Book than a whole year's reading of the Scripture lessons may do good.

Adherents of secularist opinions are not a few, I fear, in our Australian land. Members of the Jewish faith make up fair numbers. We Catholics are not a body of a weakness to be despised. Catholics object to the receiving of religious education from the mouths of any but those of their own faith. Secularists will presumably object to the imparting of

Any Religious Teaching Whatever

to their children. Those of the faith of Israel will, I suppose, be averse to have their offspring taught from the pages of the New Testament; and yet to all Christians the New Testament is the complement and the crown of the precepts of the Older Law. Let selected passages from the Old and New Testament be collected in an official manual for use in the public schools, and let it be the teachers' duty to have portions of that manual read by the scholars day by day. The children of Catholic, as those of secularist parents must always claim right of absence from the reading. The children of Jewish parents must claim such right of absence when it is from the New Testament that the extracts are read. Let the situation be calmly and deliberately considered; and will any one say that the working of the scheme suggested would be void of friction, or that secularists, Catholics, or Jewish citizens, who are alike taxpayers and parents, would be content? If discontented, could anybody in reason say that they had no grounds for their discontent?

The teachers of our State schools are public servants. Their salaries come out of the Treasury, the revenues of which are contributed to by all sections of the State. The services of those teachers should, therefore—within the scope of their duties—be equally at the disposal of every class without exception. Say the public wishes and Parliament has decreed that the State teachers shall be teachers of religion; there are but two ways by which the decree may be carried into effect without injustice. If we could suppose all denominations in the State agreeing upon one common

creed, there could be harm to none in the inculcation of that creed in the State schools. Amid the clash, however, which prevails of religious belief, the supposition is

A Supposition of the Impossible,

and the idea suggested may be at once dismissed from our thoughts. There remains a second way. If there be no hope of parents agreeing to one common creed, and if the State teachers must teach religion, every sense of fairplay requires that they shall teach each child the particular form of religion which the parents of that child hold. Again, our hypothesis leads us to an absurdity. The dream is a thing too impracticable, too wild to be seriously considered by commonsense men. Out of the difficulty there is a third way; but that third way lies in the direction of favoritism and fraud. If all denominations cannot agree to a common minimum creed, some few denominations, it may be, can. This is what the advocates of Bible-reading in State schools are apparently prepared to do. Why should their wishes for the teaching in the State school of such minimum creed not be complied with? Because it would be the giving to certain sections of the population privileges at the expense of those who shared not those privileges. It would be the compelling of certain citizens to pay for the religious training of the children of other citizens. It would be the giving of official recognition to one set of religions. It would practically be the setting up—I shall not say of an established Church—but most undoubtedly of an established group of Churches. Under such an arrangement secularists as well as Catholics would undeniably have a grievance; our Jewish fellow-citizens would have a grievance; and, if I may trust the statements made by a recent delegation, a large proportion of the Lutheran body would feel that it too had a grievance of which to complain. I am profoundly convinced of

The Indispensable Necessity of Religion

in the day school. I believe that only by its having a place in the day school can our children grow up into a God-fearing and virtuous race. My sympathies are with one and all of those who are striving to gain admission for religion in the schools of the State. The time will come, I feel assured, when the apathy and the opposition which now block the way towards a realisation of these desires will have diminished, if not disappeared; and when the lawfulness of the recognition of the Almighty and His commands within the school walls will be accepted as a first principle in Australian educational laws. The time is not yet, it is true; but it will surely, if slowly, come. When it shall have come, the solution of the religious question will be found in the multiplication of such schools as that we are opening at Mount Barker to-day. Let the State schools, secularist though they be, stand secularist as they are for those who prefer them. Let those other schools, however, which claim religion as the basis of their teaching, have that countenance and support which the taxpayers favoring them are entitled to out of the public monies voted for educational needs. Protestant England, Presbyterian Scotland, Methodist Wales, and Catholic Ireland have worked out the education problem on denominational lines. Why should young Australia be unequal to the task which has proved not impossible to older lands?

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