

GOD OR NO-GOD IN THE SCHOOLS?*

THE DISCUSSION: A CRITICAL SUMMARY

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PART III.

'THOSE THAT FLY MAY FIGHT AGAIN.'

II.—THE 'EVENING POST'S' 'DEFENCE' OF THE SECULAR SYSTEM

(Continued from last issue.)

In 1877 a party-political majority in the New Zealand Parliament found a school-creed, selected a school-theory. Creed and theory were 'as fastidious and as firm as theology,' as dogmatic as Mohammedanism, as sectarian as agnosticism. The creed-theory was the purely secular school-system, devised by Robespierre and the Revolutionary Convention (on the principles of Rousseau) for the purpose of emptying every trace of Christian belief out of the hearts of the rising generation in France; it is the same legally secular scheme by which French atheists of our own day avowedly aim at the destruction of all faith in revealed religion. Our secular system is compounded of dogmas. Whether its authors and defenders like it or no, whether they admit it or no, the whole scheme is necessarily based on dogmas—nay, even on dogmas concerning religion; that is, on religious dogmas. Some few of these dogmas are set forth on pp. 11, 41. These the *Evening Post* has not dared to face by any effort at refutation. There they are, as clear as if they were printed, in letters a foot high, over the walls, ceilings, roofs, and floors of every public school. Moreover, the 'ethical' or 'moral' teaching supposed to be imparted to children in those schools is dogma, dogma, dogma, through and through. And without dogma and dogmatic affirmation, there can be no teaching even of this thin ethical 'skilly'—the unsatisfying substitute which our State-creed offers to Christ's loved 'little ones' for the nourishing milk and the sound meat of Gospel truth and Gospel principles of morality which it has driven out of their olden place in the schools. In every such 'ethical' or 'moral' lesson, the teacher—if he is to teach at all—must be dogmatic. Every assertion of moral obligation to do this or to avoid that, is thereby an assertion (or dogma) that there is an essential moral difference between right and wrong, good and bad, actions; that we have the free will or the power of choosing between right and wrong, good and bad; that there lies upon us a duty or obligation of doing the right and avoiding the wrong. Moreover, 'the idea of obligation or duty brings us back finally to a right, and no obligation or duty can be admitted until right has been proved. But the notion of right is essentially bound up with some person who possesses that right—viz., of imposing his will upon ours. Hence any theory which fails to indicate some person possessing such a right fails to provide a solid basis for moral duty or obligation. . . . An imperious command can only proceed legitimately from a person speaking in his own name, and imposing his own will on us by inherent right. Therefore the voice of conscience, which *does* speak in this imperious tone, can only have validity if conscience is the medium by which some such person outside ourselves expresses his commands, and thus makes his will known to us.' Now this Person, Whose will is the basis of the moral order and of moral obligation, is God; and 'conscience is a reflection of the ethical character of the Supreme Being, and the vehicle through which He conveys to us His commands.' Under our purely secular system, it is illegal for the teacher to base duty or moral obligation on this, its true and only solid foundation. But he is, apparently, free to dogmatise (implicitly or explicitly) along the lines of reducing school-taught

morality to 'secular' (that is, 'worldly' and 'unspiritual') motives—such as (for instance) expediency, self-interest, the fear of the policeman, passion, sentiment, policy, or feeling. These, in their first or last analysis, are the bases of morality preached by such sects as the Utilitarians, the Positivists, the Humanitarians, the Kantians, and so on. Their purely 'secular' or this-worldly bases of ethics may, apparently, be legally suggested or pressed home in the public school; but, under our 'neutral' system, it is clearly illegal to do so in regard to the spiritual and supernatural foundations of moral obligation that are known to Christians, and, generally, to those who believe in God and in the revelation of His will to mankind. But whatever the teacher affirms or denies in the matter of ethics, such affirmation or denial is a dogma. You can no more teach ethics (or religion) in the abstract than you can teach reading or history or plumbing or the making of apple-dumplings in the abstract. You must be dogmatic—or cease to teach. There is no working alternative. Nor can there be any such thing as the 'undogmatic Christianity,' the 'unsectarian teaching,' that journalists, and even some clergymen, at times talk or write about. It has no more actual or possible existence than a circle without a centre or a bright-white that is a dead-black. At the meeting already referred to above, Mr. Balfour well remarked: 'Surely the Archbishop of Canterbury is right in saying that the idea of trying to meet the religious needs of the country by setting to work to devise what is called "non-dogmatic theology" is really the wildest dream imaginable.' When (as in New Zealand) Parliament throws one religion out by the window, another will come in by the door. In his pamphlet, *Socialism in the Schools*, the Hon. Bird S. Coler (non-Catholic) says, in this connection: 'It is true in psychology, as it is in physics, that nature abhors a vacuum. The old religion is being excluded, but a new religion is rushing in to take its place. It is variously called. By some it is known as Agnosticism, by some Atheism, by some Socialism.' It is (adds he) based on a theory of material civilisation from which God is excluded, and it is affirmative, dogmatic, and intolerant. 'The teacher in our public schools,' adds he, 'may deal with the faith of the Egyptians, with the Olympian deities of the Greeks, with the Manitou of the Indians, but Christmas is taboo, Easter is a subject prohibited. No one believes there ever was a Mercury with wings on his heels, but that may be taught in the schools. Everyone knows that there was a Jesus of Nazareth, but that must not be mentioned.' The whole pamphlet is a pathetic appeal by an earnest Protestant who loves his country, and a warning of the disastrous consequences—the spreading atheism or irreligion—which must arise from this substitution of un-Christian or anti-Christian dogma for Christian teaching and practice in the schools. One who was no friend of the Catholic faith—Jules Simon—declared that ignoring God in public instruction is equivalent to denying Him. But our laws go—and go on a dogmatic basis—much further than mere ignoring. They shut out, eject, exclude God from the schools. And even though (as in New Zealand) this has not been done from any conscious hostility to religion, we cannot ignore the implications of our law, the lessons of Continental Europe, the development of the rationalistic attack among us, and the easy and legal and logical transition from negative to positive atheism or irreligion.

And finally:—

(a) *The New Zealand Education Act nowhere says that our system of public instruction shall be 'undogmatic.'* (The 'undogmatic' theory is merely an inference of the supporters of the secular system, and has no warrant in law or fact.)

(b) *The New Zealand law merely provides that the teaching in the public schools shall be 'entirely secular'—that is, that it shall 'entirely' relate to things 'pertaining to the present world,' and 'to the present life only,' and that it shall 'entirely' exclude 'things spiritual or sacred,' things connected with 'religion and religious teaching,' things associated with the 'future life' and 'eternal interests.'*

* Bishop Cleary's latest work, of which the above is an instalment, is procurable at all Catholic booksellers.