

Current Topics

The Minister for Education and the Referendum

It is not likely that the present Government will give their official support to the demand for a referendum on the Bible-in-schools proposals; but if they do, some of their members, at least, will have some difficulty in reconciling their action with previous utterances on the subject. On the introduction of the first Referendum Bill in 1894, Mr. James Allen, who is now Minister of Education, opposed the measure, not only because he considered that particular Bill badly drafted, but also on a broad ground of principle. In his speech on the second reading of the Bill, after pointing out that the ordinary man needed educating on public questions, he went on to say:—'He had either to read or be educated in some way or other with regard to them, and I say, therefore, that under existing circumstances it is fair to assume that a large proportion of the multitude will be irresponsible, and the tyranny and despotism of that irresponsible crowd will be found to be worse than the tyranny and despotism which might and possibly does exist here sometimes.' (*Hansard*, Vol. LXXXV., p. 281.) If the 'tyranny and despotism' of an 'irresponsible multitude' were to be dreaded on purely political questions, on which electors had some reasonable chance of being fairly informed and in respect to which no specific questions of conscience were involved, how much more indefensible is it to allow a purely religious question, in which the most sacred rights of conscience are affected, to be submitted to such an arbitrament.

Dean Fitchett's Lecture

The much advertised 'Reply to Bishop Cleary' by the Very Rev. Dean Fitchett was duly delivered on Friday last to a crowded audience, a very large proportion of whom were Catholics. A disagreeable and discreditable feature of the performance was the somewhat virulent No-Popery tone adopted by the lecturer. It is one of the most striking signs of the weakness of the League's cause that a clergyman of Dean Fitchett's ability and culture found himself unable to discuss the question at issue without dragging in allusions to *Ne Temere* and the Spanish Inquisition. The following general review of the lecture appeared in the *Otago Daily Times* of Monday:—'Sir,—Will you allow me, as one of the auditors at the Garrison Hall on Friday evening, to express my extreme disappointment with Dean Fitchett's lecture. Literary finish there was, of course, and platform effectiveness, and flashes of humor that one could appreciate to the full; but not the faintest attempt was made to get down to fundamental principles, or to squarely face the issues that have been raised in this controversy. The solid body of official and authoritative evidence advanced by Bishop Cleary for every statement made by him was left untouched by Dean Fitchett. It is only by a figure of speech that Friday's lecture can be called a "reply to Bishop Cleary."

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"Evasion" was the key-note of the lecture; and it was in evidence at the very outset. Here is a sample from one of the opening sentences: "Members of the Bible in State Schools League desired to educate their children in their own way, and they did not see what a Roman Catholic bishop had to say in the matter." If one were to exercise the privilege, so effusively claimed by the lecturer, of calling a spade a spade, one must perforce describe this utterance as clap-trap, pure and simple. For the point is quietly evaded that the "Roman Catholic bishop" and his people are to be compelled to help to pay for the League's scheme. If the members of the Bible in State Schools League who "desire to have their children educated in their own way" are prepared to shoulder the cost of their proposal, they may be fairly entitled to an exclusive say on the subject; but when, as in the case of the League's demands, it is asked that the scheme be paid for out of the common purse at the common expense, the

matter becomes a taxpayers' question, and the "Roman Catholic bishops," the Congregational and Baptist Synods, the teachers' institutes, the W.C.T.U., even the Nelson Presbytery, have the same citizen right to voice their view as the most estimable of Anglican deans. It may interest Dean Fitchett, by the way, to know that the Nelson Presbytery contains within its ranks both the Clerk and the Moderator-elect of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church—a fact which surely entitles the unanimous decision of that body to some small measure of respect, at least from Presbyterians.

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'But it was at question time that the lecturer's policy of evasion was most glaring; and for the most part the so-called "answering of questions" bordered on the farcical. Here are a few samples of the speaker's treatment of serious and relevant questions. I give the unreported questions in substance only, as I heard them, but I have taken every care to be accurate. Question: "If the four religious bodies composing the League are really behind the present movement why have many representatives of these denominations expressed opposition to the League's proposals?" Answer: "That is what I would like to know." Question: "Will Dean Fitchett kindly state the number of visits paid by him to the children of his faith in the public schools during the past year?" Answer: "That is what I want to do, but the law will not allow me"—a statement which would have to receive a somewhat unpleasant characterisation if the "calling a spade a spade" principle were to be adhered to. Question: "If teaching under clause 1 be Bible extracts, merely as literature, history, and morals, why have the League adopted a conscience clause for the child? Does not the existence of this conscience clause indicate that the League felt that they were going to teach religion under this clause?" Answer: "Dean Fitchett explained that the conscience clause was there because of the Buddhists and Confucians of whom he had spoken before." Compare this with the statement made in the body of the lecture: "If the 11 per cent he had alluded to (i.e., Baptists, Congregationalists, etc.), did not accept the teaching given, they could go on with their work; they would be protected by a conscience clause"—and readers will see the delightful muddle in which this quibbling attempt to explain away the existence of this conscience clause has involved the lecturer. And in this connection the query naturally suggests itself: If only "morals" are to be taught, why should even Buddhists and Confucians be allowed a conscience clause? Asked whether it would not be better to consult the more than forty denominations that are at present outside the pale of the League in regard to the settlement of this question, the speaker answered: "I leave that to Bishop Cleary; he knows all about them." Some of these answers may be considered more or less smart; the wildest enthusiast on the side of the League will not suggest that they are convincing, or that they are in any sense straightforward answers to straightforward questions.

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'I mention, without commenting on them, some further palpable inconsistencies and contradictions in which the lecturer involved himself. In one sentence he defended the present misleading name of the League by saying that they "had taken over the name from the corresponding organisation in Queensland, and with it its aims, its principles, and its hopes"; and in the next breath he attempted to vehemently repudiate the Queensland conscience clause! At one stage we were told that the whole Bible was not suitable for the children; a little later we were informed that "if he went to a school he supplied the whole Bible to the scholars; and the ministers would put it into the schools with their own hands." Glaringly inconsistent, also, was the lecturer's answer to a question regarding the teachers' conscience clause granted by the Bible-in-schools denominations in 1903. Under the scheme for which, in that year, a referendum was desired, the teachers were to administer simple Bible lessons, and they were expressly restricted to "explanations of a literary, historical, and ethical character." (See *Otago*

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