

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. III.

MAY, 1923.

No. 5.

Religious Instruction in Public Schools.

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The January issue of the *Review and Expositor* (Baptist) contains a paper by T. W. Patterson, of Winnipeg, Can., on the question, "Should the Schools of All the People be Used to Teach the Religion of the Majority of the People?" To state this question is, of course, equivalent to answering it. The subject is so important and the argument of Mr. Patterson so good that the readers of the THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY will be grateful for a synopsis of the article, which is herewith submitted.

There is a wide-spread demand for religious instruction in the public schools. Three views may be distinguished: 1. One is that such instruction should embrace the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. 2. The second holds that the history and literature contained in the Bible should be taught. 3. The third sees in religious instruction a course or courses in Christian ethics, in individual and social morality.

As to the first view. It is an axiom with us that man has the right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience. That does not mean that religious liberty is entirely unlimited. If it conflicts with the equal rights of others or violates the common morality, it must be curtailed. For instance, when the Mormons in the name of religion attempt to practise polygamy or to induce others to practise it, the State has the right to suppress such attempts. In such a case the State interferes, not in the name of religion, but in the interest of social well-being. It is a further axiom that the primary right to educate the child belongs to the parent, and not to the Church or to the State. Education by the State is of comparatively recent origin. It constitutes an effort of parents to cooperate in the education of their children for the sake of economy and efficiency; it aims at making the coming men and women socially efficient; it endeavors to protect society

against evils which would arise if a number of the citizens received no education. Now, while the State has the right to insist that the education of a child be not neglected, it has no right to compel parents to use the schools provided by the State, nor has it the right to make instruction in one special religion compulsory. The only limitation to the rights of parents in this respect arises through their neglect to educate the child or through their giving it an education which is subversive of morality. The will of the child must not be overlooked, either; a father may teach his system of religion, but must not attempt to compel belief.

Bearing these principles in mind, we must say that the use of the public schools for the purposes of religious instruction is not consistent with the principle of religious liberty. Religion must be wholly voluntary, but State action of any kind involves compulsion. Even if the children are not required to attend the religious instruction which is given, compulsion remains. The teacher is compelled to teach. The taxpayer is compelled to pay. The parents whose child is not attending the religious instruction have not the same rights as the other taxpayers, and their child will be branded as queer and probably as irreligious.

That religious instruction in tax-supported schools is wrong will be recognized readily if a person of strong anti-Mormon convictions thinks of himself as living in a Mormon community where the public schools are used for instruction in the Mormon religion. Would he be long in registering his objections? But surely a Mormon has the same right in the community where the majority is nominally Christian that a Christian has in a community where the majority is actually Mormon. The liberty of one individual in matters of religion is as sacred and should be guarded as jealously as the liberty of the majority.

Besides, religious instruction of this kind would involve a religious test for the teachers. But the position of a teacher in our public schools is not an ecclesiastical position; it is as much a civil position as that of a postal clerk; and in any civil position the Catholic, the Christian Scientist, the Mormon, the Jew, and the agnostic have equal rights with a Protestant Christian. If there is religious instruction on the part of the State without a religious test for the teachers, also those teachers who have no interest in religion and no desire to teach it will be compelled to give religious instruction. Both considerations disqualify such persons as teachers of religion. The argument that schools in which no re-

religious instruction is given are godless is without foundation. Is the baker godless who does not put a religious tract into each loaf of bread which he bakes and sells? Of course, the great need of religious instruction for the children must be admitted. But if the State could be looked to for supplying that need, would it not equally be its duty to provide religious services for neglected communities? The fact is that in this agitation for religion in the schools we have a confession of the churches' failure. And if the State took over this work of giving religious instruction, that would not make the Church strong and more successful; it would rather tend to make it still more feeble, just as the weakness of those organs in the body whose functions are taken over by other organs is increased.

As to the second view. Some who profess to hold it are merely endeavoring to introduce religious instruction as such. They speak of Biblical history and literature and mean instruction in the doctrines of the Bible. That is an insincere attitude, which condemns itself. But many people actually do contend for what the words say, namely, that the history and literature of the Bible be taught. They are advocating the introduction of Bible-study in schools on account of its cultural importance. Now, it must be remembered that the Bible is not history as such. Its purpose is not *per se* historical, but religious. Hence the Bible cannot well be made a text-book of history. That the Bible is literature of the highest type is clear. But to place the whole Bible, viewed as a literary product, into the hands of children is objectionable, because some of the passages are not suitable for boys and girls of secondary school age. [NOTE. — The justice of this remark will be readily admitted if one bears in mind that the classes which the author is thinking of may be in charge of irreligious teachers not at all in sympathy with the high claims of the Scriptures. — A.] A better way would be to use the extracts from the Bible which are found in many of our readers at present, and to increase the number of these extracts if the present number should be thought insufficient. But even here a valid objection can be raised. Many a Christian father will doubt whether his child will gain the proper appreciation of the Bible if in the classroom the sacred Book is treated as literature. But at any rate, if the Bible is used for instruction in history and literature, that must not be called religious instruction.

As to the third view: Two questions are to be answered here: Should instruction in individual and social ethics be given in public

schools? and, Is this instruction, if given, to be defined as religious instruction? To the first question there can be only one answer, namely, that the public schools should be teachers of morality, both individual and social. Of course, formal instruction in morals may be overvalued. An adequate appreciation of moral values is not taught, but caught. Moral teaching is most effective when it is not injected into the curriculum as a subject of formal instruction, but when the moral values that are in the present curriculum are exploited to their full. From the point of view of organized society, life has one great problem, namely, that of living and working with one's fellows; and there are few subjects in the present curriculum that have not a bearing upon this problem. For instance, the study of history is really a study of ways in which men have tried to solve the problem of living and working with their fellows. Still more important is the life in the school. The school is a world in miniature; and through its organization, its sports, and other activities it may be teaching the art of living with one's fellows more effectively than can be done by formal instruction in morals alone. But all this — and here the second question receives its answer — must not be labeled religious instruction. Some people do look upon it as such, namely, those who regard the achievement of a right social order as the vital thing in religion. But all who cannot think of religion without its supernatural sanctions, and to whom the Godward side of religion is fundamental, will refuse to characterize such instruction as religious, and if the State provides training in ethics and calls it religious instruction, it approves of a sectarian conception of religion and, by implication, criticises the view of those who hold that religion is an entirely different matter.

Thus the plan of introducing religious instruction in the public schools is wrong in principle, impractical in practise, and ineffective as a remedy for the failure of the Church. Those who work for it had better turn their energies to discovering and overcoming the cause of religious failure in the Church and in the home.

The argument of Mr. Patterson is irrefutable. The only disappointment which the reader of his article feels is that the one way out of the difficulty is not mentioned — the parochial school. Strictly speaking, this matter did not belong to Mr. Patterson's subject, and that may be the reason why he did not touch upon it. But must not his article be to us an urgent call to hold fast that which we have, our parochial schools, which solve the problem of religious education as nothing else that can be proposed?