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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

A Hundred Years of Education Controversy

BY

JOSEPH McCABE

AUTHOR OF "THE TRUTH ABOUT SECULAR EDUCATION,"
ETC., ETC.

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A HUNDRED YEARS OF EDUCATION CONTROVERSY

THE lamentable conflict in regard to religious teaching in our elementary schools is conceived by many to be an acute crisis that wise and just statesmanship may presently remove. Painful as it is to all citizens that the important work of our schools should, even for a decade, be hampered so grievously, there is a wide hope that some Minister of Education will yet adjust the balance between the claims of the religious bodies, or that their leaders will come to a prudent compromise. Hence, though there is a growing inclination to favour the secular solution, large numbers of people still refuse to look on it as inevitable. Their memory ranges back, at the most, as far as 1870, and they feel that the time has not yet come to despair of finding a satisfactory adjustment of religious claims.

History is the memory of nations. Citizens and statesmen are as strictly bound to scan its records in the ordering of great national issues as they are to consult their personal experience in the conduct of private affairs. And the moment one turns to the history of this education controversy one feels that the hope of finding any stable compromise sinks perilously close to zero. For one hundred years the same controversy has raged in England. For one hundred years the representatives of Anglicanism and Nonconformity have sought in vain for a satisfactory adjustment of their claims. For one hundred years educationists and statesmen have been harassed and impeded in their work by this interminable dispute about religious education in the schools; and we are to-day not one inch nearer to a settlement of it than our grandfathers were in 1807. This, surely, is a circumstance to be taken into serious account in the actual controversy about the schools.

Just one hundred years ago, in the year 1807, Mr. Whitbread, member for Bedford, introduced an educational measure into the House of Commons. Social writers like Adam Smith (1776) had long urged that it was the Government's duty, and would be to the nation's advantage, to set up a national school-system. A prominent clergyman (Malthus, in 1798) described the condition of things in this country as "a national disgrace." Another, Sydney Smith, at the beginning of the century, declared that "there was no Protestant country in the world where the education of the poor was so grossly and so infamously neglected as in England." Three centuries after the Reformation and the invention of printing only one in twenty of the population could read and write. There were, of course, schools in the country. Thousands of grammar schools, poor schools, dames' schools, and Sunday schools were in existence; but their work was ridiculously meagre and ineffective. Mr. Whitbread's Bill proposed, therefore, that local authorities should have power to set up and maintain schools wherever they were needed.

Into the details of the Bill we need not inquire, as it never became law. It passed the Commons, but was rejected contemptuously by the Lords. The Lord Chancellor (Eldon) and the Archbishop of Canterbury denounced it as a peril to their respective orders. It was, in fact, openly acknowledged that the Bill was allowed to pass the Commons only on the understanding that it would be demolished in the Lords.

It is important to realise that, though there were at that time other formidable impediments to the education of the people, the chances of the Bill were imperilled by just the same controversy that we wage to-day. There was an aristocratic objection to the education of the workers—Sir S. Romilly wrote in his diary that most of the Commoners even "thought it expedient that the people should be kept in ignorance"—but the chief difficulty was religious. It was regarded as the thin end of the wedge of secular action, and was mainly opposed on that account. The Archbishop of Canterbury denounced it roundly as derogatory to the authority of the Church.

The truth was that—many will learn with astonishment—

the same three parties held the educational field in 1807 that we find waging their endless war in it to-day. The most powerful party, the Churchmen, claimed full denominational teaching in the schools; the Nonconformists and many neutral politicians thought—precisely as their grandchildren think—that simple Bible lessons were the ideal; and the followers of Adam Smith (men like Robert Owen, a great educationist) pleaded for purely secular instruction. It was a golden age of educational reformers, though England was in so backward a condition. Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Herbart had stirred Europe with their ideas. In Manchester a little group of social students, including Coleridge and the great chemist Dalton, discussed them. One of the group was the Quaker Joseph Lancaster, a man of deep religious and philanthropic feeling. He founded a system of elementary schools for the poor (known after 1814 as "The British and Foreign School Society"), and when, says Mr. Holman, the wealthy found that "children could be taught next to nothing for next to nothing," he secured considerable support. Another of the Manchester group, Robert Owen, set up in Scotland a large school on purely secular principles, and it soon became one of the wonders of Europe. Foreign Governments sent officials to study it. The father of Queen Victoria was one of its greatest admirers.

Thus undenominationalists and secular educationists were both in the field by 1804; and the third party quickly made its appearance. A Mrs. Trimmer discovered—as so many Mrs. Trimmers do in our day—that the Lancastrian schools were heretical, and she induced an Anglican clergyman, Dr. Bell, to take the field with a scheme of denominational schools in 1805. Churchmen gathered at once under the new banner, while the Nonconformists rallied round Lancaster; and the country, just one hundred years ago, was ringing with what flippant writers called "the conflict of Bel(l) and the Dragon," or what the historian must call the first act in the drama (or tragedy) of our educational controversy. Two generations have passed away, but the same battle rages round our schools, the same war-cries resound, the same plausible suggestions are thrust on us, and there is the same utter lack of any means of compromise; except that now we have the plain experience of a hundred years to teach us how impossible all idea of compromise is.

The succeeding acts in the drama are in substance but a repetition of the first. The scene changes marvellously as the last traces of feudalism are swept away: the actors pass behind the wings, and new ones come on. But the issue remains the same, and the obstacles remain. The limits of this essay would not suffice to set out the whole story in detail, and I must be content to dwell on a few of the chief stages of it. The struggle between the Denominationalists and Undenominationalists was carried on vigorously and unceasingly. In 1811 Dr. Bell's supporters founded the "National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Doctrines of the Established Church," in opposition to the "Royal Lancastrian Institution" (which became the "British and Foreign Schools Society" in 1814). In both cases the instruction given was of the poorest conceivable type. Dr. Bell recommended a barn as a good structure for a school, and insisted that the children of the workers should not be taught "beyond their station." In both sets of schools the monitorial system (the teaching of children by children), a pernicious system, was adopted. They fell incalculably short of Owen's splendid school at New Lanark, where one found the finest methods then known and a curriculum of equal breadth to that of the modern Council school. By the year 1818 there was still only one in seventeen of the population of England in school, and the coarseness and viciousness of the peasantry and factory-workers were terrible.

At this point Lord Brougham (then Mr. Brougham) and other politicians took up the cause of national education once more. There had been a State system of schools in Prussia since 1794, in Holland since 1814, and in France since the rule of Napoleon. In the American States education was far advanced, and we had ourselves set up an excellent system in Scotland in 1803, and voted £23,000 for the Protestant schools in Ireland in the very year that Whitbread's Bill was rejected. The condition of the country was scandalous, and men like Brougham pleaded that it was time wealthy England did something to remove the gross illiteracy of its people. In 1816 Brougham secured an inquiry into the educational state of London. In the comparatively small London of that time it was found that 120,000 children had no schooling whatever. They played in the streets—streets and courts of a foulness inconceivable to us to-day, for London and Paris were, until fifty years ago, inferior to ancient Rome or Babylon in sanitation—until their ninth year, and then they entered the army of illiterate workers, with stunted minds. Brougham then, in 1818, had a Select Committee appointed to deal with educational charities. He had a shrewd idea that, if these endowments were equitably and economically managed, we could set up a system of schools without calling on the national Exchequer.

How that scheme was defeated, and educational endowments are to this day diverted from that instruction of the poor for which they were intended, it is not within the limits of this essay to consider. But in 1820 Brougham introduced a general educational measure into Parliament, and this was wrecked on the rock of the religious difficulty. In view of the imperfect municipal life of the time the proposals of the Bill were not without merit. The magistrates and the local clergy were to act in conjunction in building schools wherever they were needed, and the funds were to come partly from local, partly from national resources. It was a fair beginning of a national scheme. But Brougham soon found that one yawning gulf lay across the line of progress, after all scruples about national economy and the danger of educating the workers had been removed. This was the now familiar pitfall of compromise as to religious instruction. Brougham met the Churchmen by giving the Anglican minister almost absolute control over the schoolmaster. He could fix his salary, arrange or modify his secular curriculum, and examine the poor teacher when he willed. But Brougham sought then to conciliate the Nonconformists by excluding all denominational teaching from the curriculum. Simple Bible lessons, the ever-ancient and ever-new device, were expected to satisfy all the sects, and the Lord's Prayer was the only element of ritual to be admitted. For the sequel we have only to recall our recent experience, and remember that history repeats itself. Neither religious party was satisfied ; neither would abate its claims to any practicable extent. The

Bill had to be withdrawn, and for another thirteen years we continued to bear what Malthus had called our "national disgrace" because our clergy could not find a compromise in regard to their conflicting claims.

I do not mean that the disgrace was removed in 1833, but that year witnessed the first modest beginning of national action in regard to the schools. It will be remembered that 1832 had seen the passing of the great Reform Bill. Enormous expectations had been aroused in the workers of the country, and it was under pressure of a more or less serious danger of civil war that Parliament was at length reformed and the franchise extended. The whole hope of social reform in the country now centred on the reformed House of Commons, but the hope was quickly converted into disappointment as far as education was concerned. Under pressure of Mr. Roebuck and others, Lord John Russell was induced in 1833 to pass an annual grant for educational purposes of £20,000. In that same year the small State of Prussia granted £600,000 for its schools. But the niggardliness of the grant was not the worst feature. Dreading the religious feeling in the country, the Government decided to hand over the money each year to the two rival societies of voluntary schools. Not only did the *Journal of Education* warmly protest at the time, but experts are now agreed that this distribution utterly prevented any increase of educational work and augmented religious rivalry. As the grant was given on a basis of funds already provided by the societies, the more wealthy Church-society got the lion's share. Of £600,000 granted in the next seventeen years, the Church schools got £475,000.

A body of educational reformers had by this time formed themselves into a Central Society of Education, and pressed unceasingly for national action. But the Bishop of London and other prelates denounced the Society, and for six years more thwarted its action. By the year 1839 more than half the children of the country were still utterly illiterate, and the majority of the remainder received only a pretence of education. Dean Alford was moved to write in that year: "There is no record of any people on earth so highly civilised, so abounding in arts and comforts, and so grossly and generally ignorant, as the English." There was, indeed, a minority of liberal and distinguished Anglican clergy who deplored the situation—men like Whately, Hook, Stanley, and Kingsley; but the overwhelming majority of the clergy of all sects were obstinate in their respective claims. A few words on the situation at this date (1839) from the two leading historians of the subject will make it clear that I do not exaggerate the injury done to education by the religious controversy. Mr. Holman says, in his *English National Education* (in the "Victorian Era Series"): "This continued impotence of Parliament to provide a national remedy for what every single member of both Houses admitted to be a national disgrace and danger is probably one of the most striking features in the whole of its history. The only thing that kept the Government from making the mass of the people human was the determination of some to keep them from being made anything less than divine." And the only other English writer of distinction on English education in the nineteenth century, Mr. Adams, says: "The interdict against a united and national system came from the moral teachers of the people, and was pronounced necessary in the interests of religion." Even liberal Churchmen like F. D. Maurice would admit no compromise. Any children, he said, ought to be admitted to the Church schools (now receiving £20,000 a year from national funds), but they *must* submit to Church teaching.

Two observations on the situation at this period are not without interest in view of our actual controversy. In the first place, we must note that it is the very sincerity and devotedness to their doctrines of the clergy that raised the most formidable obstacle to the progress of education. However much one may dissent from their doctrines and differ from their estimate of the value to mankind of those doctrines, one may respect their zeal in the interest of what they deem to be of great importance. In the earlier years of the education controversy one can understand how they could lose sight of the general civic interest under the stress of their religious zeal. But it is surely time that their modern successors realised the error of thus mixing up civic and ecclesiastical ideals. We look back on a stretch of history in which that mixture has wrought terrible mischief to the civic ideal. The interminable wrangle has shown us that no satisfactory adjustment of their conflicting claims is possible; and that the civic interest must be studied on a purely civic basis, and the religious interest confined to religious teachers in the religious atmosphere of the church or chapel.

The second observation I would make is that there has been a remarkable change since those days in the character of the instruction given in elementary schools. Some politicians still speak of the "religious atmosphere" in the denominational school, and maintain that it is not a mere question whether we shall transfer a few religious lessons from the school to the church. The use of this phrase is very largely an empty tradition of the earlier school. Up to the middle of the century the whole curriculum was pervaded with religious ideas. When we listen to-day to the claim that the Anglican or Roman Catholic school has a general permeation of religious feeling, we wonder how it is possible to find this religious atmosphere in the long hours that are filled with lessons on arithmetic, geography, grammar, and such subjects. There is, of course, no religious element whatever in these lessons to-day (and they form four-fifths of the whole curriculum of the denominational school),[1] but there was fifty and more years ago. Manuals of arithmetic and geography are still to be found that show a real "religious atmosphere," and Mr. Holman gives many details in his interesting history. Arithmetical problems were founded largely on the Old Testament, and geography centred on Palestine much as a medieval map would have done. Now that these lessons have become purely secular, and religious instruction is confined to a few prayers and hymns and half-hour lessons, no very great change will be involved in transferring them to the proper home of religious cultivation.

However, let us return to the historical study. Statistics showed that whereas in Prussia one in six of the population attended school, in Switzerland one in seven, and in Holland one in nine, in wealthy England the proportion was one in fourteen. Clearly the voluntary societies were not discharging the function of educating the nation. Educationists redoubled their pressure. They obtained an increase of the annual grant from £20,000 to £30,000—not a formidable matter, Brougham pleasantly observed to the Lords, seeing that they were that year voting £70,000 for the building of royal stables—and they at last secured a beginning of governmental action in the work of education. One of the most pressing needs in the country was for the efficient training of the teachers. Even in the Lancastrian body six months' training was thought amply sufficient for an elementary-school teacher. Indeed, what was given in the great bulk of the schools of the country would not be admitted by any modern expert to be "education" at all in any real sense. The teachers were miserably inefficient; and when we learn that their average income was only about £22 a year we can imagine what type of people they were. The Government therefore proposed to set up a Normal School (training college) at Kneller Hall. They were at once confronted by the religious difficulty, and their scheme foundered once more on it. They proposed to pay only the teachers of secular subjects in the training college, and leave the students of each denomination free to bring in ministers of their respective bodies for religious lessons. Once more the conflicting interests of the Churches wrecked the scheme, and it was years before there was any effective training of teachers in the country.

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[1] The present writer was educated in a denominational school, was afterwards co-manager of a denominational school, and later rector of a denominational college.

But Lord John Russell triumphed over clerical opposition in one important respect, and made a beginning of national action. He formed a Committee of the Privy Council on Education, and this slender institution was destined to grow in time into our modern Education Department. But what storms of religious opposition it had to face in its early months! The Bishops of London and Chichester led the vast majority of the clergy in a violent assault upon this intrusion, as they called it, of the State on the Church's domain. There were Churchmen, like the Bishop of Durham, who saw how gravely national interests were being thwarted, and were willing to compromise. But the vast majority of the clergy were vehemently opposed to State action.

Nonconformists proclaimed the new Committee to be "a secular tyranny," while Churchmen denounced it as a menace to the Establishment. The religious war of 1906 was tameness itself compared to the war on the new education authority, slight as it was, in 1839. The bishops and the lords temporal actually walked in procession from the House to Buckingham Palace—a unique incident, I think, in the annals of that dignified body—and begged Queen Victoria to abolish the Committee. The young Queen answered them with a truer dignity than their own. She told them that she had sanctioned the Government's proposals from a deep and well-considered sense of duty to her people, and the Lords went away disappointed.

The controversy went on for some time with great vigour, and in fact it was only moderated by another of those fatal concessions to the clergy that hindered the real progress of education. By a more or less secret arrangement the Anglican clergy were granted control over the inspectors of schools who were appointed under the new authority. It was an abdication of its functions that would be listened to with amazement if it were proposed in our time, and it was an unjust arrangement. The religious lessons given in the (undenominational) schools of the British and Foreign Society were controlled by Church inspectors, and the irritation and rivalry were greatly increased. The new Committee fell so far under the dictation of the archbishops that in 1840 it passed a minute directing that "their lordships were of opinion that no plan of education ought to be encouraged in which intellectual instruction was not subordinated to the regulation of the thoughts and habits of the children by the doctrines and precepts of revealed religion."

This unjust preponderance stirred the Nonconformists to continuous action, while expert educationists tell us that elementary education steadily deteriorated. The passing of the Factory Acts was supposed to have secured some measure of instruction for the children of the factory-workers. In point of fact the Act was flagrantly scouted. Children of tender years were still worked for twelve hours a day, and the education provided for them was farcical. The lodgekeeper, or the stoker's wife, would gather them in some dark shed—often in the coal-house—and laboriously teach them to identify the letters of the alphabet. The country was overrun with poor widows, crippled workers, and all kinds of impoverished people who earned a few shillings a week by "teaching." The Central Education Society fought desperately for some improvement, and in 1843 two important efforts were made. Both were wrecked on the perennial religious difficulty. The first was a Bill for the effective instruction of factory children. They were very largely of Nonconformist parentage, yet the Bill unluckily gave higher control to the Anglicans—who had wrecked every measure that did not do so—and the Dissenters naturally resented it. They had now become sufficiently powerful to oppose such measures with effect, and they forced the withdrawal of the Bill. This triumph brought home to them the fact that the extension of the franchise had enormously increased their political power, and this deepened the long political struggle over the schools, and added the further complication of our civic and political life with the conflicting and irreconcilable claims of the clergy. The situation became worse than ever. Let me express it impersonally in the estimate given by Mr. Holman, the impartial historian of the subject. The Dissenters, he says, "now fought for their own hand in the same way as the Church party did, and combined with the latter and others to resist the exercise of control by the State authorities; and thus they became real obstructionists to national progress in education." The Congregationalists alone deserve a partial exemption from this heavy censure. They at least refused to accept State aid, and enjoined their members to support their own denominational schools. The Roman Catholics were in the same logical position until a few years ago.

The second effort of the reformers in 1843 was to introduce a Bill, in the name of Mr. Joseph Hume, for purely secular and moral education, but it was counted out. The reformers, however, manfully continued their work, and gradually won some of the great Dissenters to their view. In 1847 they founded in Lancashire—always honourably placed in the history of education—a league for the furtherance of their aims. The famous Corn-law orators, Cobden and John

Bright, lent their support to it. The radicals of the south joined forces with it, and it gradually attained considerable power. From a "Lancashire Association" it became a "National Public Schools Association." There seemed a prospect at last of convincing the country of the impracticability of balancing religious claims in regard to the elementary schools, and rescuing the instruction of the people from this harassing association with theology.

In 1850 the League decided to test their strength. The minister of South Place (London) Chapel, Mr. W. J. Fox, a brilliant speaker on social reforms and member of Parliament for Oldham, introduced a comprehensive measure into the House. The inspectors were to report on the deficiency of schools in particular districts, and an efficient provision for universal education was to be made out of the local rates. Denominational schools were not to be superseded, but would in future only be paid for the secular instruction they imparted. On the other hand, the new Government schools, which were to give free education, should be controlled in the matter of giving or omitting undenominational instruction by a kind of local option. The Bill projected a vast advance in the field of elementary education, but it was resented by both religious parties, and was heavily defeated on the second reading. The National Association—supported as it was by Dissenters like Cobden, Fox, Milner Gibson, and W. E. Forster—was fiercely attacked, and denounced as irreligious. They had put before the country, members said in the House, a choice between Heaven or Hell, God or the Devil. So for the sixth time a fair and promising scheme of national improvement was shattered on the rock of the religious difficulty.

The various acts in the drama of our educational history are, in fact, so similar in essence, so closely parallel to the act we are taking part in to-day, that one moves rapidly on to the end of the century. Education remained in a state of partial paralysis. Mr. Fox had read to the House a manifesto issued by a large body of London working men, in which they complained pathetically of this paralysis. It concluded: "The controversy has waxed hotter and more furious; our little ones have been forgotten in the fray, and their golden moments have been allowed to run irrevocably to waste." It needs little reflection to convince one that this was no exaggeration. The *number* of schools in England at the time is no test whatever of the educational work done. The vast majority were ridiculously inefficient. Teachers were given an absurd modicum of training, and inspectors were given no training whatever until 1857. The greater part of the machinery was rusty and antiquated, and the salaries were too slender to attract competent men. Anyone who reads Mr. Kay's comparison of England with the continental countries in 1850 will be amazed at the appalling statements of this great expert. As late as 1860 it was stated in a Government report that out of the two and a-half million children in the country only one and a-half million were at school; and of these 800,000 were found in flagrantly inefficient schools, under teachers who themselves reached no decent standard of education. London was far below the level of any large Roman town of fifteen centuries earlier. In fact, few children of the Roman towns had been without elementary education.

Yet every measure for the betterment of the situation was met with the same resistance. Mr. Forster's Bill for the education of the poor was rejected in 1867, and the storm that raged about his great Bill of 1870, when the Board schools were founded, is too well known to enlarge upon. Forster found that two-fifths of our children between the ages of six and ten, and one-third between the ages of ten and twelve, had no education whatever; that, in other words, one and a-half million of our children were still untouched by the influence of the teacher, such as it was. No wonder that he wrote bitterly to Kingsley: "I wish parsons, Church *and other*, would all remember as much as you do that children are growing into savages while they are trying to prevent one another from helping."

The rest of the story needs no telling. The familiar device of giving "simple Bible lessons" was again dignified with the position of a great political expedient, and thirty-seven years of hard experience have again proved its futility. Surely it is time that we all, clergy and laity, recognised this plain fact of its uselessness? Mr. Birrell rightly disavowed any claim to originality in bringing it forward in 1906. It goes back to the time of his grandfather. It was Cowper-Templeism in 1870. It was Russellism in 1850, and Durhamism in 1840, and Broughamism in 1820, and Lancasterism in 1807. It is discredited by as prolonged and explicit a political experience as was ever given to a suggested compromise. It is as bitterly and powerfully assailed to-day as it was in 1807. As long as it is retained, it holds out a prospect of fresh wrangling with every swing of the political pendulum.

The object of this essay is to inform those who fancy that the giving of "simple Bible lessons" is a new and imperfectly-tried device how completely it has proved its impotence. And no other compromise is even proposed to us. Happily the lesson is being read more candidly to-day. The modern Secular Education League has the support of distinguished Roman Catholics and many clergy of the Anglican and Dissenting Churches. They believe that they can sufficiently tend their religious interests in their chapels, and they plead that we no longer hamper our highest civic ideals and embarrass our political issues with religious differences. We cannot call back on to our planet the millions who have passed through England in the nineteenth century without ever having their finer powers developed; the millions who have gone down into the darkness with stunted souls, after a life of heavy drudgery and the coarsest surroundings. But we can unite in the framing of a unified and thoroughly effective system for training the body, mind, and character of the child, and we may leave the clergy to give the training in their own doctrines in their own institutions.

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