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THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT THE BIBLE IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Active efforts are being made at the present time in various quarters for the reintroduction of the Bible into our public schools. This movement gives rise to a controversy very similar to the one which raged on the occasion of the elimination of the Bible as a text-book from the American public school system. The following brief historical consideration of that earlier struggle, therefore, seems appropriate at the present time.

The opposition to the Bible as a text-book began about 1840, especially in the large cities,¹⁾ and at the instigation of the Roman Catholic Church. According to Goodrich,²⁾ the Catholics at this time numbered 800,000, out of a total of about 10,000,000 church-members in the United States. The Roman Catholics favored legal exclusion of the Bible from the public schools; Daniel Webster opposed legal exclusion.³⁾

The controversy was really due to the rise of state-supported public schools. Denominational schools wanted state support; but it became the established policy of the State not to give such support. The controversy involves the interpretation of the Constitution and the question whether the Bible is a sectarian book.

1) Monroe's *Cyc. of Ed.*, I, p. 373.

2) Peter Parley's *Tales about the U. S.* (1883), p. 227.

3) Cheever, *Right of the Bible in Our Public Schools.* (New York, 1854.)

The literature called forth on both sides of this controversy is very profuse and not always to the point, but an enumeration of some of the arguments advanced on both sides may be of interest. On the one hand, it was argued that *the Bible should be retained in the public schools*:—

1) Because the American school system is called ungodly and Christless in Europe.⁴⁾

2) Because the Bible is already in the schools, and it would be unjustifiable to put it out.⁴⁾

3) Because the Bible is unsectarian, because divine. Caleb Mills puts this argument as follows: "In science there will necessarily be progress, and consequently a change of text-books will occasionally be demanded. But the text-book in morals is the production of an Author whose wisdom needs no revision, whose knowledge is susceptible of no increase, and whose benevolence admits of no question. The Bible, without note or comment, is installed in the schools of Indiana, and its continuance as the moral standard in these nurseries of her future citizens will as surely mark the period of her prosperity and grace the zenith of her glory as its exclusion would prove the precursor of her decline, the herald of her shame."⁵⁾

4) Because Christianity is part of the law of the land; hence the State has the right of religious education.⁶⁾ This was Daniel Webster's argument.

5) Because the Bible is a text-book which should not merely be read at devotions, but studied as history, as a book of moral science and practical ethics, and as a model of literary excellence, but not as theology.⁷⁾

6) Because it teaches the best morality that has ever been taught in the world, and is the basis of all the morality in the land.⁸⁾

4) Barnard's *Amer. Jour. of Ed.*, II, pp. 153—172.

5) Barnard's *Amer. Jour. of Educ.*, II, p. 485.

6) Cheever. Cf. Barnard, II, pp. 153—172.

7) Barnard's *Am. J. of Ed.*, II, p. 693.

8) *Common School Journal*, V (1843), p. 274.

7) Because "all education should proceed from man and lead to God" (Kruesi).⁹⁾

8) Because without religious principle there can be no true, dependable morality. Philip Lindsley, President of the University of Nashville, said: "Religion, which requires us to be like God, constitutes the whole of moral excellence. And in proportion as religion influences the heart and life will be the moral worth of any individual. There can be no principle of integrity, of truth, of kindness, of justice, independently of religion. Nothing does, nothing can, nothing ever will, restrain any mortal from any indulgence, pursuit, gain, or abomination which he covets, and to which no disgrace is attached, except the fear of God or, what is the same thing, *religious principle*."¹⁰⁾

9) Because Paul teaches that children should be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.¹¹⁾ (Cf. Eph. 6, 4.)

10) Because the argument against the use of the Bible can be reduced to absurdity.³⁾

11) Because the Christian cannot in good conscience send his children to a Bible-less school.³⁾

12) Because a conscience outside the Word of God is not as authoritative as one enlightened by it.³⁾

13) Because conscience knows neither majority nor minority, and therefore this question cannot be decided, by majority.³⁾

14) Because the right to teach the Bible is from God Himself to mankind.³⁾ The Bible is, accordingly, not a sectarian book.

15) Because Justice Story held that the Bible is the common inheritance of the world, and that the right of a government to interfere in matters of religion is indispensable to the administration of civil justice.³⁾

9) Barnard's *Am. J. of Ed.*, V, p. 195. Cf. XVI, p. 49.

10) *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 35. Cf. Cheever.

11) *Ibid.*, X, pp. 166—186.

16) Because the exclusion of religion is a suicidal policy in education.³⁾

17) Because the State appoints the formality of an oath to be taken on the Bible.³⁾

18) Because churches and parochial schools are glaringly inadequate to the handling of the problem.³⁾

19) Because European experience, *e. g.*, the case of Scotland, shows the benefit of the Bible in the schools.³⁾

20) Because the absence of the Bible will remove public confidence in the public schools, and alienate the affections of respectable people.³⁾

21) Because it is wise to take a middle ground between technical religious instruction and none at all.¹²⁾

22) Because many families do not go to church or read it, and hence will become heathen if the Bible is not used in the schools.⁸⁾

23) Because the Bible is the best book for the exercise of the voice and for improving the taste in composition.⁸⁾

24) Because the Bible inspires civil and religious liberty.⁸⁾

25) Because the character of a child is formed before seven. An old dying man may repeat prayers in a forgotten mother-tongue. Hence the need for early religious and moral training.¹³⁾

26) Because civilization and refinement, morality and religion, follow upon the introduction of the Bible.¹⁴⁾

On the other hand, it was argued that *the Bible should not be retained in the public schools*:—

1) Because Bible-reading, like repeating the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed, is ritualistic, not educational.¹⁵⁾

2) Because the use of the Protestant Bible is unfair to Catholics and Jews.¹⁵⁾

12) *Proc. N. E. A.*, 1869, pp. 17—21.

13) *Barnard's Am. J. of Ed.*, I, p. 29.

14) *Abstract of Proc., Mass. Teach. Assn.*, 1845, p. 11.

15) H. C. Benedict, in *Cheever's Right of the Bible*, etc.

3) Because there is no necessary relation between religious and secular instruction.¹⁵⁾

4) Because the Koran is no more sectarian than the Bible, and yet is excluded.¹⁵⁾

5) Because the formation of moral character depends more upon the teacher than upon books.¹⁶⁾

6) Because no one can teach religion without possessing it; hence irreligious teachers defeat the purpose of religious instruction in the public schools.¹¹⁾

7) Because using the Bible in the public schools degrades it.¹⁷⁾

8) Because the use of the Bible involves the school in polemics.⁴⁾

9) Because the home, parochial and Sunday-schools, Bible-class, and Christian teachers can take care of the religious side.⁴⁾

10) Because literature (including Bible-selections) can take its place.¹⁸⁾

All this controversial argumentation resulted in the discontinuance of the use of the Bible in the schools. It also affected the character of public school readers. The development can be traced in the *Reports of Proceedings of the National Education Association*. As late as 1875, most of the teachers wanted the Bible in every school, but not by compulsion.¹⁹⁾ In 1886, it was reported that the use of the Bible was being discontinued more and more.²⁰⁾ In 1888, it was stated to be impossible to put the Bible back as sole reading-book.²¹⁾ At the 1889 meeting Catholic prelates made a definite charge that the public schools are godless.²²⁾ Already in 1856 it was said that nineteen out of every twenty text-books "put asunder what God hath joined together," namely, religion and knowledge.²³⁾

16) Barnard's *Am. J. of Ed.*, XVI, pp. 323—330.

17) *Ibid.*, X, p. 512.

18) *N. E. A. Proc.*, 1886, pp. 128—148.

19) *Ibid.*, 1875, pp. 116—124.

20) *Ibid.*, 1886, pp. 128—148.

21) *Ibid.*, 1888, pp. 57—70.

22) *Ibid.*, 1889, pp. 111—179.

23) Barnard's *Am. J. of Ed.*, I, pp. 326 ff.

Accordingly, most modern compilers of school readers consciously attempt to exclude the religious element altogether. Already at the beginning of the century this tendency was noticeable; but the common notion throughout the greater part of the last century seems to have been that a religious element, which should be free from sectarianism, might be retained, and, in fact, that moral instruction, which nearly all the readers sought to mediate, was not really possible without some basis of "general Christianity." An examination of several hundred readers, primers, and spellers of the period makes it apparent that Hon. Joseph White, for instance, in his address on "Christianity in the Public Schools" before the N. E. A. in 1869, gave a correct statement of the tendency characteristic of the period: he urged the teaching of "general Christianity" with the Bible as text-book. This was held by him and by those participating in the discussion of his paper to be a *moral* and a patriotic duty, legal, and possible. But most modern readers definitely seek the exclusion of the religious element.

The moral element, on the other hand, is commonly retained, but with a definite tendency to depend upon the teacher rather than upon the book for moral instruction. Furthermore, the emphasis upon literature in the readers has tended to eliminate the moral element as specifically such, and especially to do away with the tacking on of moral maxims in every possible connection. Of recent years, however, there has been a strong movement in certain quarters to reinstate the Bible in the school as a text-book in morals. The Chicago Women's Educational Union, for instance, published *Readings from the Bible* as a text-book in morals in 1896.²⁴⁾

In 1881, Mr. John B. Peaslee advocated the substitution of literature for the Bible in the schools.²⁵⁾ He believed this would satisfy both parties in the Bible controversy. In 1891,

24) *Readings from the Bible*. Selected for Schools, and to be Read in Unison.

25) *Education*, II (1881), pp. 150 ff.; cf. *N. E. A. Proc.*, 1886, pp. 128 to 148.

De Garmo lent the movement his support. Appalling ignorance of the Bible was soon noticed in the rising generation. This called forth an argument in favor of the unsectarian teaching of the facts of Bible-history in high schools for the sake of an appreciation of literature, which is full of Biblical references.²⁶⁾ Isaac Thomas²⁷⁾ summarizes the arguments against the Bible in the high school: 1) No book can be separated from the interest with which it was written, and be made to teach that which is only incidental. The intent of the Bible is wholly religious, and its literary character is altogether incidental. The great ignorance of the high school student must be helped by the teacher in English Literature. 2) As literature in the high school, it would get poor teaching. 3) It is beyond the boy's capacity to appreciate it as literature. 4) Whose annotated edition should be used? 5) The feeling of the plain people that the Bible is the Book of Life rather than mere literature.

Nevertheless, the present tendency is to reduce the Bible more and more to the plane of literature.²⁸⁾ Bible selections are often given in recent readers, chiefly for their literary value, especially the Twenty-third Psalm, certain Old Testament narratives, and certain parables from the Gospels.

What is the view of the State in regard to the Bible in the public schools? Two policies of State legislation have been distinguished.²⁸⁾ One policy forbids the use of any book in the public schools calculated to favor the religious tenets of any particular religious sect, leaving it to the courts to determine in a particular case whether or not a book is sectarian. The other policy, while forbidding the use of sectarian books, has left the way open for the use of the Bible. No State excludes the Bible by name. The Bible is, accordingly, never formally, but often practically, excluded from the schools.

26) *Education*, XVI (1896), pp. 362—364.

27) *School Review*, XVII (1909), pp. 705—712.

28) *Monroe's Cyc. of Ed.*, I, Art.: "Bible in the Schools."

The State has further held that the Church should teach religion, but that the State is also obliged and competent to teach morals.²⁹⁾ J. H. Crooker has delivered an argument that, because our State is secular, our schools must be non-religious, secular schools. As for the Bible in public schools, it cannot be used as religious revelation; read without comment, it becomes an object of suspicion; there are objections to its being read as literature; and morals can be taught without it.³⁰⁾ Paul H. Hanus has argued very forcibly, a) that formal or explicit instruction in religion in the public schools is undesirable, unnecessary, and, in most cases, legally impossible; and b) that religious education, including detailed instruction in the Bible, is the duty of the Church.³¹⁾

This argumentation in support of the view of the State naturally suggests a final question: What is the view of the Church in regard to this matter of the Bible in the schools and religious education? At least three different views are held. Broadly speaking, the Reformed Churches may be said to hold, in regard to religious education, that the Church should supplement the State in education. Historically, the school is a daughter of the Church; to-day the Church should supplement the public school system wherever it breaks down, especially in regard to adolescents and higher religious education, and emphasis should be laid on the Sunday-schools.³²⁾ It is further held, quite generally, that the Bible should be in the public schools, both as literature and as text-book in morals. Their argument has been put by Dr. N. H. Axtell as follows: "Now it being true that

"1. Moral culture is an absolute necessity to the existence and prosperity of the State, and that

29) *U. S. Com. Ed. Report*, 1890/91, p. 1052—53.

30) Crooker, *Problems in Amer. Society*, Ch. V. (Boston, 1889.)

31) Hanus, *Beg. in Indust. Ed. and Other Ed. Disc.*, Ch. VII. (New York, 1908.)

32) Adams, *The Church and Popular Education*. (Johns Hopkins U. Studies in Hist. and Pol. Sci., Series XVIII, No. 8.)

"2. The Bible is the best text-book of morals, whatever else it may be, and that

"3. Bible-readings elsewhere cannot be an adequate substitute for Bible-readings in the public schools, where the State undertakes to educate all her children, it follows that

"4. *There should be the reading of the Bible in the schools.*"³³⁾

The view of the Roman Catholic Church can perhaps be stated summarily as follows: a) The State should support Christian education, *i. e.*, denominational schools. The State schools to-day are godless. b) The King James Version of the Bible is a sectarian book, and should be excluded from the schools.³⁴⁾

In the view of the Lutheran Church both public schools and parochial schools are necessary. The Bible and religion in the public schools would violate the principle of separation of Church and State,³⁵⁾ which is our guarantee of religious liberty.

In this connection attention may be called to Prof. C. Abbetmeyer's discussion in the current volume of the *Lutheran Witness* (February 8 and 22, 1916), where it is forcibly argued that the State should not permit the reading of the Bible in the public schools, for the following reasons: 1) Such Bible-reading would be an act of religious worship; 2) Bible-reading in the public schools, even "without note or comment," would be "sectarian instruction"; 3) such Bible-reading would do no appreciable good, but would work great mischief; 4) such Bible-reading would be a regrettable departure from the safe American policy of the separation of Church and State.

Decorah, Iowa.

O. A. TINGELSTAD.

33) Cook, *The Nation's Book in the Nation's Schools*, p. 146. (Chicago, 1898.)

34) See, for instance, *N. E. A. Proc.*, 1889; also *Report of Catholic Educ. Assn.*, 1911.

35) *Lutheran Witness* (St. Louis, Mo.), February 13, 1913.