

Shall Religion be Taught in the Public Schools?

by A.T. Jones

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Our system of free public schools is now legally established in all the States, and supported by a strong public sentiment. The public school has myriads of friends, and but few avowed enemies. There is, however, a misconception on the part of some as to what it is, and for what purpose it is maintained.

Some regard the public school as semi-religious, originated and maintained for the purpose of teaching, among other things, the doctrines of the Christian religion.

Before attempting to show how impossible it would be, in this land of every diversity of creed, from that of the Mussulman to that of the Methodist, to teach a religion in these schools without doing violence to some tax-payer's ideas of the only true faith, let us examine the origin and intent of the public schools.

Origin and Intent of Public Schools

The civil government has created and maintained the public school for self-preservation. Ignorance may prolong the existence of a despotic form of government, but the stability of a republic, where the responsibility of government rests on all alike, depends upon the intelligent action of the mass of the people.

Realizing this, each State has made provision for the maintenance of a system of free public schools, by universal taxation,—Protestants Catholics, Jews, and infidels being taxed alike for their support. The public school rests upon the foundation of political necessity. It has in view, not only the happiness and well-being of the individual, but the preservation of

the State, and is therefore a purely civil institution maintained for political purposes,—neither in the interest of, nor in opposition to, religion.

The public school, as a part of our governmental policy, comes under Lincoln's definition of government; it is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” They are neither by, nor for, the Protestant, the Catholic, nor the infidel, as such, but are for the people, the whole people, without reference to religion.

It is an undisputed principle in political economy, that the State may appropriate money raised by taxation to purposes which are only of general necessity or of supreme utility, and which can be attained by the State only, or by the State to a degree or in a way very superior to those of private effort.

It is on this principle that the State refuses to require the teaching of religion in the public school supported by general taxation. The teaching of religion is not an object to be attained by the State only, neither, can the objects of religion be attained by the State to a degree or in a way superior to those of private effort.

All history proves that the State, as a teacher of religion, is a disastrous failure. In placing the common school on a purely civil basis, the State does not, in any way, antagonize religion. It is simply an acknowledgment that the teaching of religion is outside its jurisdiction; that religion is a matter not to be handled by a purely secular government.

The Duty of the State in Public Education

While this view of the public school is regarded by the majority as self-evident, there are some who, because of this attitude of our schools toward religion, declare that they are “godless.” This comes from a misconception of the province of civil government, and the mission of the public school.

Had God delegated to civil government the teaching of re-

ligion, a failure to do it by means of the public school might merit the above criticism. The State, in providing for the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics, without teaching religion, is simply attending to its legitimate business, which the Church does when it attends to the teaching of religion. The term "godless" cannot be applied with any more consistency to the common school because the Bible is not read and religion is not taught in it, than it can be to schools of phonography, telegraphy, or art, because the Bible is not taught in them, or than the term traitor can be applied to the Church, because it does not teach the principles of civil government, civil engineering, and military tactics.

The Difficulties of Teaching Religion in Public Schools

The fact that the State is wholly unqualified both in point of origin and object, to teach religion, should forever settle the question of religion in the public schools. But besides being wrong in theory, the teaching of religion in the public school is impossible of practice owing to the wide diversity of opinion on the subject of religion which prevails among the patrons of the public school.

While it is true that many of the people here are outwardly favorable to religion, there are some who neither practice nor favor it. These certainly would not wish their children to be taught religion in the public schools. As tax-payers and supporters of these institutions, they have a right, equal with that of all others, to the benefits of such schools; and to ignore this right is an injustice of which no good government will be guilty.

If we limit the question to those who believe in religion, the difficulty is not obviated; for the question then arises, "What religion is to be taught?" Among the numerous phases of belief which the theology of the day includes, how shall it be determined which is the proper one to be promulgated by

law? The State should not favor one religion above another, and certainly could not do so without meeting the united protest of a large number of her citizens.

It may, however, be said that the design is not to teach in the public schools the peculiar tenets of any denomination or sect, but only the general principles of religious belief which all sects hold in common. Thus Senator Blair, introduced in the Fifty-first Congress a religious amendment to the Constitution which proposed to have taught in the common schools, of every State “the fundamental and non-sectarian principles of Christianity.” But even this apparently liberal measure would discriminate against the Jews and other denominations which are not Christian, leaving them no alternative but that of joining the ranks of its opposers.

If we confine the question wholly to Christian denominations, the difficulties of the undertaking remain as pronounced as ever; for when we come to consider these “fundamental and non-sectarian principles of Christianity,” we find in the first place that Christendom has not yet defined what the fundamental and non-sectarian principles of Christianity are.

To determine these, therefore, would be the first thing necessary; and this would require the united action of all Christian denominations, through their representatives. But so widely do the denominational lines of Christendom diverge, that any agreement of view, even upon fundamental principles, is impossible.

How, for example, would Protestants and Catholics be able to agree upon the fundamental principles of Christianity, when they are in dispute over the very source from which these principles are drawn? Catholics regard the Protestant Bible as a sectarian book, and vice-versa.

The ten commandments, constituting the foundation of all Christian morality, cannot be overlooked in considering the

fundamental principles of Christianity; yet the difference between Protestants and Catholics with respect to the decalogue is irreconcilable.

Nor is the difficulty lessened if we confine ourselves to Protestants alone, for the abolition of the precepts of this law is a doctrine boldly advocated by some Protestant sects, and as earnestly opposed by others.

The truth is, there is not a single fundamental principle of Christian theology upon which all denominations are agreed. It must be evident, therefore, that the proceedings of any general council called for the purpose of defining the non-sectarian and fundamental principles of Christianity, would be anything but harmonious.

The result of attempting to force upon all classes of a community, through the medium of the public schools, the acceptance of certain doctrines as constituting the principles of the Christian religion, could not but be evil in the extreme, both to the public schools themselves and to all whose interests they concern. Discord and sectarian strife, from which people are never too free, would be given an uncontrollable impulse.

It might indeed happen that in some communities, where exceptional conditions prevailed, the attempt would meet with no serious opposition; but in many, if not in the large majority, it would be certain to call forth demonstrations of human prejudice and passion. Divisions would arise in the schools where the beliefs and preferences of parents would be echoed in their children, resulting in the formation of caste, and unavoidable disputes and animosities. When religious teaching is once given a place in the public school curriculum, the door is open for the introduction of all manner of sectarianism, as the theological bias of teachers or school directors may determine.

Proper Relationship of Religion and State

But above all other considerations in the settlement of this question, is that of the proper relation of religion and the State; and this relation, if it can be called such, is one of total separation. The teaching of religion in the public schools would be a violation of this principle, the validity of which is recognized by the American Constitution, and established on the highest authority, both human and divine.

The attempt, if successful, would result in the establishment of a State religion; for if religious instruction is to be given in the public schools, it is evident that public school teachers will have to be qualified for this work, in addition to the ordinary requirements of their position. There would be demanded of them a profession of religion, and a knowledge of what constitute the fundamental principles of Christianity,—a demand which would be in violation of that well-known principle of our government, that

no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States,

—and a standing bid for unconverted teachers making a profession of religion without in reality espousing it, which, in other words, means hypocrisy.

Christianity, as interpreted and defined by certain leading ecclesiastics, would be the established religion of this country. It matters not that no one sect or denomination would be recognized and supported by the State. There would be a union of religion with the civil power,—a union which differs only in name from a union of Church and State.

The unparalleled success achieved by our system of free public schools, is due in great part to their freedom from that disturbing element, religious controversy. Had our public schools taught a system of religion which antagonized the beliefs of the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Universalists, Unitarians, Jews, or infidels, they would not have been sup-

ported and patronized as they are to-day.

When the course of study in the public schools is confined to secular instruction, and the teaching of religion is left to the parent, the denominational school, and the Church, all classes can patronize them. But let religion be taught in them, and all whose views of religion are antagonized, are compelled, in self-defense, to withdraw their children from the schools which they are taxed to maintain.

In brief, the injustice of such a step, the confusion and sectarian strife which it would be certain to create, the incalculable injury to the public schools, and all the evils which naturally result from a union of Church and State, return an overwhelming negative to the question propounded by this leaflet.

General Grant spoke wisely when in a speech at Des Moines, Iowa, in September, 1875, he said:—

Leave the matter of religion to the family altar, the Church, and the private school, supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the State and Church forever separate.

Dr. Tiffany, pastor of the Hennepin avenue M. E. church, of Minneapolis, also reasoned well, when, in an address at the Rochester (Minn.) High School commencement exercises, he said:—

Church and State must not be united. As Americans, we deny the right of any religious or other combination to have authority in civil matters. We recognize religion as a necessity, and the Church as a form of it, but we look with suspicion upon any interference it may attempt in government...Home shall teach youth obedience, the churches religion, but the schools shall give knowledge. The State must not teach religion, for that would give it authority to decide what religion to teach. The State must educate the children to make them intelligent, not saints.—Rochester (Minn.) Post, July 13, 1890.

The family, the Church, and the denominational school af-

ford a proper and ample field for the religious education of the youth. The attempt to force such instruction into the public schools is not only dangerous, but altogether needless. It is one which should awaken the vigilance, and call forth the united opposition of all true American citizens.

The Bible in the Public Schools

There are some who, while accepting, in a general way the foregoing view of the question of religion in the public schools, nevertheless, insist on a compulsory reading of a portion of the Bible as an opening exercise in the public schools. To them the Bible means only the Protestant, or King James version, and in urging that it be read in the common schools, they do not recognize the fact that the Catholic has a different Bible, which he regards as the only faithful translation of the Scriptures; or that the Jew accepts of the Old Testament only, regarding the New not only as false, but as cruelly charging his ancestors with the murder of the world's Messiah.

The difference between these Bibles is considered by each party as vital to the eternal welfare of the believer. Says the Protestant Bible, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Says the Catholic Bible, "Unless ye shall do penance, ye shall all likewise perish."

This is not an accidental difference in translation, but is a difference maintained throughout the entire Catholic Bible, based on the distinctive Catholic doctrine of penance, in opposition to the Protestant doctrine of salvation through faith, as the following quotation from the "Doctrinal Catechism" proves:—

He [Luther] invented a thing which he called justifying faith, to be a sufficient substitute for all the above painful religious works, an invention which took off every responsibility from our shoulders, and laid all on the shoulders of Jesus Christ; in a word, he told men to believe in the merits of Christ as certainly applied to them, and live as they pleased.

There are other important differences which appear in the text, and would be made apparent by the mere reading of the passages.

The difference between the Protestant and Catholic Bibles, and the Jewish Bible, is far greater, as the Jew rejects the entire New Testament as not only a base fabrication, but as containing an unjust charge against his people.

The infidel rejects the whole, and finds his views of religion met in the writings of Rosseau, Paine, or Ingersoll.

Which of these Bibles shall be read in our common schools? To this question comes a chorus of opposing answers. Who shall decide? Is it the prerogative of the State to decide which of these Bibles contains the truth, and which error? If we so decide, we adopt the theory which gave to the Dark Ages their moral gloom.

Leaving the difference in Bibles, there is another important difference with regard to the propriety of reading any Bible without comment. The Protestant position is that “the Bible without note or comment is the infallible rule of faith and practice.” The Catholic regards this as a dangerous doctrine, fraught with eternal ruin to the child; and to say that he is not sincere, is to sit in judgment on his conscience. And the conscience of the Catholic is as sacred in the eyes of the law as the conscience of the Protestant.

In studying this subject, we should not allow our preconceived ideas or time-honored practices to prejudice us. The time was, when men as conscientiously believed that the government should protect religion by burning heretics, as do some to-day that the Bible should be read in the public schools.

One way of bringing this question squarely before us is to reverse the condition by placing the Catholic, the Jew, or the

infidel in the majority. Would the Protestant, who believes that salvation comes alone through faith, be willing that his child be taught from the reading of the Douay Bible, that to obtain it, he must do penance?

If infidels were in the majority, would the minority, Protestant and Catholic, be willing to have the exercises of the day prefaced by the reading of extracts from Thomas Paine, Robert Ingersoll, or some other exponent of infidelity? Here it is that the Golden Rule has a practical application: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

Referring to the use of the Bible in the public schools, the *New York Independent*, of Oct. 1, 1891 says:—

There is no question that this is making public schools sectarian, and that it is unjust and contrary to the principles of our government, which allow of no establishment of religion. The only consistent and the only truly Christian way, is to give religion to the care of the Church and let the State take care of secular matters.

Declaration of Principles

We believe in the religion taught by Jesus Christ.

We believe in temperance, and regard the liquor traffic as a curse to society.

We believe in supporting the civil government, and submitting to its authority.

We deny the right of any civil government to legislate on religious questions.

We believe it is the right, and should be the privilege, of every man to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience.

We also believe it to be our duty to use every lawful and honorable means to prevent religious legislation by the civil government; that we and our fellow-citizens may enjoy the

inestimable blessings of both religious and civil liberty.