

Pamphlets for the People

No. 10

**The Church's
Fight
for the Child**

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The Church's Fight for the Child

OVER the whole of the civilised world the priests of all religions are fighting to control the education of the child. Unlike many of the fights in which the clergy are concerned this one seldom descends to disguise. The fight, in this country, against a brighter Sunday is disguised as being partly one for the protection of labour. The parsonry does not as a rule bother much about protecting labour from Monday morning until Saturday night, but they become touchingly anxious about labour during the first twenty-four hours of the week. The desire to maintain control over marriage is camouflaged as a deep concern for the morality of married couples and the sanctity of the home. But with education there is hardly any disguise at all. The clergy say quite openly that the future of religion is bound up with the clerical control of education. If they cannot put religion into the child they can never hope to get it into the adult. The child must be stamped with the brand of religion before it is old enough to claim the right to examine and to reject. As the situation becomes more desperate the demands become more extreme. These have now reached the stage when it is urged that an inquisition into the religious opinions of teachers should be undertaken. The situation is clear. The clergy say: "We are vital to the future of the child." They mean: "The capture of the child is vital to our future."

We may note that the clergy do not raise an outcry about education in general. There has never been a

clerical outcry against insufficient schools, against insantary schools, against ill-equipped schools, as to the cultural qualifications of teachers, or about any other matter connected with the schools save that the religion taught has not been of the right brand, or that there was not enough of it. The clergy, Established and Dissenting, have been concerned with one thing only—that children should receive the *right* kind of religious instruction.

Why this situation? We shall be nearer to an understanding of it if we bear two things in mind. The first is, that the situation is peculiar to religion. Outside religion, no sensible person is in a hurry to *force* instruction on the child. If the child is slow or backward, education can wait on opportunity. It is realised that teaching without understanding on the part of the taught is useless. It is with religion alone we meet the insistence that understanding or no understanding the child must be taught to repeat a certain number of formulæ, each commencing with a solemn, "I believe." Whether the child has any comprehension of what it professes to believe does not matter. If the child can be taught to repeat day after day, "I believe," then there is at least a chance that it will go on saying "I believe" all its life. This anxiety over the child is not merely the case with religion in general. It is true of every sect. Each one insists that its own sectarian brand shall be placed upon children if they are to grow up and become clients of this or that Church. Each insists that every child must be branded, as a farmer brands cattle, before it is let loose in the world. It is branded as sheep are branded, and with the same object—to be profitably sheared at a later date. The capture of the child is an essential preliminary to the retention of the adult. The Churches dare not trust to the mature intelligence for an acceptance of their teaching. It is the child or nothing. That is the cold fact which inspires the clerical fight to control education.

The second thing to bear in mind is that this clerical concern for the control of education is a modern phenomenon. I do not mean by this that the clergy have not sought to control whatever education, scholastic or social, existed; they have, and this control was given them by the conditions of social life. Religious doctrines arose from a definite set of conditions, intellectual and social (the division is artificial, but it will serve), and so long as the environment remained unchanged there was no glaring contradiction between religious teachings and the pressure of the environment but as social conditions altered, knowledge became greater and more or less hostile to the prevailing religious teachings. The priesthood was thus driven to create an artificial environment where the young were concerned. For the adult there was reserved the controlled *expression* of opinion, so far as it could be exercised. The free play of contemporary life and knowledge became inimical to religion. Religious control of the education of the young became the chief condition for religious organisations maintaining their hold on the adult world. It became a case of the child or nothing. The churches said, in effect, we cannot hope to convince the intelligent adult, but we can so influence the child that in one direction at least it may never achieve maturity.

Rightly to understand this situation we must take a backward glance at the nature of human evolution. In an earlier pamphlet in this series (No. 7, *What is Free-thought?*) I have pointed out that human society differs from animal groups in the fact that man *makes* the tools with which he overcomes his environment. He not only makes tools, he formulates definite ideas, creates institutions, and develops customs. But the handing on of these and an understanding of them depend upon a conscious educational process. If by some miracle every human being above infancy was wiped out, and if, by

another miracle, all the infants survived, they would find themselves surrounded by all sorts of structures, inventions, and institutions, without the least understanding them. Civilisation would have to commence all over again. The continuity and the development of civilisation are dependent upon the conscious transmission of ideas.

Further, the possibility of this transmission is dependent upon the possession of a quality which exists to only a very limited extent in the animal world. This is the quality of educability. In the animal world we find a number of well-developed instincts and a very limited educability. With man we find only one or two instincts, and a great capacity for education. Man is born the most helpless of all animals. His infancy is the longest of all animal young ; his dependence upon adults the most pronounced. But it is this initial helplessness that gives the condition for the dominating strength he exhibits in mature life. It is upon these facts that all civilisation rests ; it is this situation that sets up the religious fight for control of the child's education.

In the earlier stages of civilisation the perpetuation of the *social* life of a people is guaranteed mainly by the force of custom. Of all things, custom is the most powerful influence in primitive societies, and because of mankind's ignorance of the nature of the forces in operation, the primitive lore and customs of the tribe everywhere take the form of religious teaching. New-comers into the tribe, as they approach adolescence, are carefully instructed by their elders into the sanctity of this lore and custom, and it is impressed upon them that to depart therefrom is to risk the anger of the gods. The law is "What has been, must be" ; this rule is still very powerful even to-day, and in what are known as progressive societies. The ignorant and unthinking at one end of the social scale, the self-interested and the aristocracy at the other, are still the principal advocates of "What

has been, must be." The Coronation ceremony of George VI. is an illustration of the persistence of a primitive and wholly stupid custom which dates back to the earliest phases of tribal life.

Custom finds its strongest expression in religion, because man's first conscious appreciation of life and nature takes that form. Primitive man knows quite well that if he would reap he must sow ; if he would kill an animal or an enemy he must strike truly and forcibly, and, in other directions, actions and tools must be adequate to the purpose aimed at. But beyond these immediately practical considerations is the conviction that, behind all and dominating all, is the action of those ghostly existences that have come down to us in the form of the world's gods. An ignoring of their presence and power, constitutes conduct that would give them offence, and may involve disaster to the tribe. To keep on good terms with the gods is the first task of early man. The social environment of man for many thousands of generations continues to be overwhelmingly religious.

The perpetuation of religious belief is in this way secured by social life as a whole. The child is, of course, always and everywhere the vehicle of the continuity of civilisation ; but in early times even until very recent times, there was no need for the priesthood to concern itself with the consideration of whether the child would grow up religious ; it could not well do otherwise. Social life as a whole guaranteed the perpetuity of religion. There was no difficulty in keeping people religious ; the difficulty would have been to prevent their being so. Between religious teaching and social environment there was no obvious opposition. And so long as this state of things continued, in this country, broadly until towards the end of the eighteenth century, the clergy took little interest in education. From long usage they dominated such education as existed, and the danger of a people growing up without religion hardly existed.

It was a change in the nature of the social environment that brought home to the priesthood of all religions a recognition of the fact that their grasp on the world was weakening. The priest could no longer stand as the indispensable mediator between man and his gods. The movements of nature were ceasing to "declare the glory of God," and were showing nothing but the interaction of natural forces and the power of human intelligence. The problem set the clergy thus became, "How can we protect the child from the non-religious influences of its environment?" It became also a question for society of whether the school should be completely affiliated to modern life and thought, or whether it should permit this affiliation to be impaired by its association with ideas and teachings that properly belonged to the childhood of the race. The priesthoods were not merely forced into a fight for the child, they were forced to fight for their own existence. Their cry became, "Give us the children, or we perish."

The reader will now be able to understand the manner in which this fight for the child has arisen, and he will also realise why it is that so much of what is called religious education consists not in putting something into the school, but in keeping something out. Its main purpose is to prevent the child as it approaches adolescence acquiring an understanding of the tendencies of modern life, or, if this cannot be altogether prevented, at least creating a prejudice against them. All the time the religious teacher is pursuing his task he is haunted by a consciousness that what he is teaching as unquestionable truth is largely at variance with modern thought. To adopt a simile of Ingersoll, he stands with his back to the sun teaching his pupils to worship the shadows.

What has been said also explains the demand that religion must be approached in a spirit of "reverence," and also that there must be maintained during the religious lesson a proper "atmosphere." No such de-

mands are made with regard to any other subject. No one asks for a particular "atmosphere" for any subject other than religion. Religion alone demands special conditions for its cultivation, because the aim of the clergy is to defeat the influence of conditions that are sharply antagonistic to religious beliefs.

Childhood to-day thus offers, not merely a good opportunity for the priesthoods to perpetuate their rule, it offers the *only* opportunity for so doing. Religion dare not wait; it must *breed* followers if it is to have them. That is the plain economic aspect of the situation. Every child born represents a potential client of the Churches, and the priest hovers round the cradle like a needy chancellor of the exchequer speculating on the taxable possibilities of a new industry. It is a case of the child or disaster. Just over a hundred years ago the clergy stood quietly by while children were being murdered and ill-treated in British factories to fill the pockets of the mill-owners. To-day they are asking for payment for services rendered in asking that British society shall help them in turn by defrauding the child of the opportunities for independent intellectual development.

In this country the cry of education for the people was born of three main tendencies. First, the revolutionary ardour that set in with the French Revolution of 1789. Next, the influence of the Freethinking crusade of the eighteenth century and, finally, the influence of the Nonconformist movement which, while at one with the Establishment in the desire to capture children for religion, wished to protect them against the teachings of the Church. The Church was just as anxious to protect the children of the country from the "poison" of dissent. Rival sectarian schools were opened, and there was seen a curious intermingling of the demand for education, as such, with the aims of rival religious bodies, each of whose interest in education was motivated by a desire to defeat a rival.

Very soon the Government began to vote small grants of money towards the upkeep of elementary schools. The education given was of the poorest kind, and the teachers were of the poorest character. In some towns—Oldham and Ashton were among these—there was not a single school for poor children, and in 1840 forty per cent. of the men and sixty-five per cent. of the women could not sign their names. In 1833 a parson told a factory inspector that writing was not taught in any of the Church schools. Years before (1807) a Bill for the establishment of elementary schools in England had been defeated in the House of Lords, the Archbishop of Canterbury (who then drew some £25,000 annually, besides other "pickings") leading the opposition. In 1833 a Commission reported that the Government was not receiving value for its grant of £33,000. It was, in fact, the gross scandal of the state of education under the dominance of the religious bodies that led to the passing of the Education Act of 1870.

Then, again, it was demonstrated that the real interest of Church and Chapel was the breeding of clients. When the Government announced its intention to introduce a measure dealing with Education (England then had a standard of education lower than Prussia, France, Sweden, Holland and other countries), it was taken for granted, first, that religious teaching would be provided; second, that, as it was a Government measure, the religion taught would be that of the Church of England. The Dissenters took alarm. They invoked the principle of State neutrality, and declaimed against the evil of State interference in matters of religious belief. For a time Nonconformity and Freethought joined hands in the creation of a very strong movement against religious teaching in the schools, and a powerful organisation was formed with the battle cry of "Education, Free, Compulsory and Secular." The strength of the opposition made the Church pause. It looked as if it might happen that the new schools would omit religion alto-

gether. Conferences were arranged, back-stairs agreements were made, and that elastic creation, the Nonconformist Conscience, ended by selling the pass, and betraying the principle which it had sworn to defend.

The celebrated "Compromise" was proposed and became part of the Bill. A form of religious teachings was devised which, in the circumstances, suited both Nonconformist and Churchman. Everyone was to pay for its upkeep, but Christians alone benefited. No one else was considered, except so far as those who did not wish for religious instruction might withdraw their children for the time during which the religious lesson was being given. Everybody was to be taxed for teaching the religion of other people. As Sir William Harcourt well put it, the Government proposed to compensate people for making them pay for a dinner they didn't have by not compelling them to eat a dinner they didn't like.

It was an arrangement between two Christian bodies, and no one else mattered. We have seen these two divisions of the Christian world recently work the same unprincipled dodge, with an "agreed syllabus" of "religious teaching." "Agreed" between Christians. Others must be content with being permitted to live, and pay for the religious education of other people's children.

The Nonconformists are mainly responsible for seventy years of strife in the schools over religion, and have thus helped in the maintenance of hundreds of insanitary sectarian schools, perpetuated defective instruction, and forced thousands of teachers to be hypocrites concerning their own religious opinions.

What is it at which the genuine educationalist should aim? The imparting of knowledge is, of course, essential. But in the main education should consist in a

wholesome training of mind and body, in the inculcation of habits of cleanliness, truthfulness, honesty, kindness, in a development of a sense of truth and justice. Does anyone seriously pretend that to these ends the teaching of religion is essential? I do not deny that much good is often *associated* with religious instruction. No religion has even been able to live for long without coming to terms with man's social nature and needs. There are teachings that are common ground with all human beings; there are forms of conduct upon the performance of which the very existence of the human group depend, and in the absence of which social life would be an impossibility.

No one denies that good things have been taught in the name of religion. But let anyone seriously ask himself whether lessons on gods, angels, heaven and hell, the miracles of Jesus or the plagues of Egypt have, in these days, any real bearing on the cultivation of conduct. Why! the child cannot have even a passing appreciation of what it is being taught; it can only accept religious doctrines in a sense which it often has painfully to unlearn in its later years. To confuse is not to educate; to mystify is not to enlighten. The final and fatal criticism of religion is that it is not education at all. It never rises higher than mere instruction, and that of a very vicious kind. The teacher aims at making the child independent of him. The aim of the priest everywhere is to keep the child, and afterwards the adult, in a state of complete dependence upon him. Religious instruction stresses human weakness where a sound education stresses innate human strength.

In this fight for the child it is not uncommon to hear much of the child's own individuality. We do hear of the rights of the State, the rights of the parents, the rights of the teacher. In the quarrel between adults the child has been overlooked; we have forgotten what it is we are educating. When we are properly alive to the fact that there is a child involved—that all the rights

lie with it and all the duties with us—a saner view will obtain. It is a crime to treat a child as a mere instrument of propaganda, whatever be the form it takes. And when we are asked to hand over the child to the ministrations of an order that has throughout the whole of European history exerted the most sinister influence, we can but recall the words of Kingdon Clifford, "If there is one lesson which history forces upon us it is this: Keep your children away from the priest, or he will make them the enemies of mankind."

I have in what has gone before been able only to outline a very great subject. I will briefly summarise the case against the maintenance of religious instruction, in and out of State schools. The present system is unjust to the child and to the citizen, because:—

(1) There is no longer even the pretence that a modern society represents a moderately united whole in religious belief. Not more than ten per cent. of the population attend Church, and the advance of opinion has forced the Government to abolish a compulsory profession of religious belief as necessary to holding any public office, with the exception of the King and the Lord Chancellor.

(2) It is unfair to the teacher because it introduces an unofficial religious test, generally unconcealed, but sometimes quite open, and operates in both the appointment and the promotion of teachers. The tendency therefore is to drive the better type of character out of a profession in which character is of so great importance, and force many who remain to a life of hypocrisy and dissimulation. In the schoolroom the teacher should be supreme; while religious teaching is in the schools he cannot but be playing the dishonouring and dishonourable part of a parson's proxy.

(3) It sets up sectarian divisions in a place where the great aim should be for all to meet on a level of equality. It subdues the feeling of a common life in favour of a division based upon sectarian difference. Children may have together lessons on every subject but one, that of religion. There should be no sectarian labels in school. It entirely reverses the spirit of unity that every wise teacher tries to encourage.

(4) It places before the child as unquestionably true, teachings which the adult will admit are open to very serious question, and which are rejected by large numbers of men and women whose characters are beyond reproach, and whose intelligence is beyond question. The religious lesson is the only one taught in school which large numbers of children have to unlearn in later years, often at the cost of much unnecessary pain. Multitudes of adults have testified to the great pain and distress experienced when they were forced to discard their religious instruction. The remark so often made that we must give the child our religion, and then leave it to retain or reject it when it reaches maturity, is of all apologies for religious instruction the most stupid. If we were to use the same argument on any other subject, its indefensible nature would at once be apparent. Children are entitled to the best, even though their parents may have been born to the worst.

Many years ago there raged a discussion as to whether a child was born an Atheist—or a Theist in virtue of some religious instinct. There is no such instinct. Neither, so long as we use the word in its proper sense, is a child born an Atheist. The truth is that the child, as I have already said, is born the most helpless and the most plastic of all animals. The qualities it has may find expression in this or that direction, on a higher or a lower plane as it reacts to the influences brought to bear upon it. It may express pugnacity on either the low ground of brute force, in the regularised

form of militarism, or on the higher level of the adventure of ideas, or in braving the dangers of exploration or scientific experimentation. Much of our development does as a matter of fact turn upon the sublimation of human tendencies.

The fight for the child is, as a matter of scientific fact, a struggle for the control of the direction of civilisation. But even this expression has to be taken with caution. The history of the Christian Church has shown how much may be done by a policy of uniformity and elimination. These plans meet with considerable success, but it is at a terrible cost, and are bound to break sooner or later before the inevitable variations of the human mind. It is the movements of humanity as a whole before which dictatorships, whatever be their aim, sooner or later crumble.

The situation before us is evident, and the choice clear. It is that of either aiming at turning out our children as mere gramophonic reproductions of ourselves, or permitting, nay, encouraging the free questioning of all ideas and all institutions, and creating a capacity for weighing opinions before accepting them. Are we to pay more attention to the temper of mind endued by our training than to the inculcation of specific beliefs, which in practice means no more than a mere re-echoing of received opinion? The vast majority of children are eager to know; their curiosity is insatiable. Why not encourage it? Why this continuous aim at turning out our children as mere copies of ourselves? In how many homes do children get the mental freedom they ought to have? In how many homes is it not the case that they are forbidden to read this, or to think that? It is time that parents awakened to the fact that none of us is so perfect that one's children may not mark an improvement.

The secret of progress lies in the plasticity of human nature. That is at once our strength and our weakness.

For it means that the newly-born child may, within the limits of its native capacity, become anything. It may become a vital factor in the progress of the race, or it may be turned out a mere conveyor of outworn ideas and primitive superstitions. The churches are always alive to this fact, why cannot all of us be equally alive to it? It is useless saying the child must choose for itself when it is old enough to do so, and at the time so train it that when it does grow up it is incapable of forming an opinion that is worth bothering about. Independence of mind is just a habit, and that habit must be formed at an early age if it is to function healthily in later years. The old Greek simile of life was that of a relay race, in which a participant carried a lighted torch to be handed, still burning, to a successor. But the Greeks had no "sacred" book with stereotyped rules, and its deadening "Thus saith the Lord." It is time we read the lesson that is writ large over the history of Europe: Keep your children away from the priest, or he will make them the enemy of mankind.

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