

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT

SCHOOLS

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A BLAST FROM THE PAST: JOHN STUART MILL ON SECULAR EDUCATION

As public school parents are bombarded on all sides with funding and religious freedom issues, it is useful to pause, and go back. The battle for public education and religious freedom is long, but hope is longer.

The battle is an old one. It was articulated in nineteenth century England when the education of the poor in England was wrested from the Churches – the established and nonconformist alike – and provided by the State. The question, then and now, was what to do with religious education in State schools. Then, as now the churches fought back. One of their ideas was to teach children in State schools a subject called unsectarian ‘Common Christianity’. John Stuart Mill has this to say in answer to Mr Cobden and the Lancaster Association for education which promoted the idea of special religious education in a secular education system:

These problems are still with us. Unfortunately Christianity has often been used, or should I say, misused, in the name of religious, but in reality in the interests of gaining power, money, and status for religious people who value these commodities.

SPEECH ON SECULAR EDUCATION

John Stuart Mill

(Not delivered : written in 1849)

SIR, the commencement at Manchester of a movement for a national education not under the control or management of either established or non-established clergy has already, it would seem, made no inconsiderable impression on the public, or else *The Times* has made a false move and miscalculated the signs of the coming public opinion ; for already at the very beginning of the agitation that journal has discovered, what it did not find out in the case of the Corn Law League until the fourth or fifth year of its existence, that the thing is not merely a good thing, but what is so much better in the estimation of *The Times*, a thing destined to succeed. The promoters doubtless thought no less, but they probably did not expect so early a recognition of their prospects. How much then it is to be lamented that an enterprise of so much promise should have been inaugurated by an act of truckling and compromise ; that for the sake of conciliating people who are not to be conciliated and whom it ought not to have been an object to conciliate, the Association should have let itself be persuaded by Mr. Cobden, aided by some dissenting ministers, to sacrifice its distinctive flag, and instead of

calling itself an Association for secular education should have sheltered its timidity under the ambiguous designation of unsectarian.

If this is only a change in words and means nothing it deserves no better name than that of deception ; if it does mean anything, if by unsectarian is to be understood something different from secular education, the broad principle of religious freedom which was to be the foundation of this great educational movement is abandoned.

In the debates of the Conference there was a good deal of misunderstanding, some of it I fear rather wilful on the part of Mr. Cobden and his supporters **respecting the import of the word secular. There is no uncertainty about it. There is not a better defined word in the English language. Secular is whatever has reference to this life. Secular instruction is instruction respecting the concerns of this life. Secular subjects therefore are all subjects except religion. All the arts and sciences are secular knowledge. To say that secular means irreligious implies that all the arts and sciences are irreligious, and is very like saying that all professions except that of the law are illegal. There is a difference between irreligious and not religious, however it may suit the purposes of many persons to confound it. Now on the principles of religious freedom which we were led to believe that it was the purpose of this Association to accept, instruction on subjects not religious is as much the right of those who will not accept religious instruction as of those who will. To know the laws of the physical world, the properties of their own bodies and minds, the past history of their species, is as much a benefit to the Jew, the Mussulman, the Deist, the Atheist, as to the orthodox churchman ; and it is as iniquitous to withhold it from them. Education provided by the public must be education for all, and to be education for all it must be purely secular education.**

When, then, the Association refuses to say that their education is secular but are willing to say that it shall be unsectarian, what do they mean ? Doubtless that it is still to be exclusive, though in a minor degree. That religion is to be taught, but not sectarian religion. That they are not to have Church of England teaching, or Catholic teaching, or Baptist, or Methodist, or Unitarian teaching, but I suppose Christian teaching ; that is, whatever common elements of Christianity are supposed to be found in all these sects alike. How far this is likely to conciliate the various classes of sectarians the Association will probably hear loudly enough from the sectarians themselves. I am much mistaken if they will be at all thankful for any religious teaching which expresses no opinion on a subject on which Christians differ in opinion, or if the substratum of universal Christianity which it is proposed to teach will appear to them at all different from Deism. But this is their concern. I take higher ground. I maintain that if you could carry all the sects with you by your compromise you would have effected nothing but a compact among the more powerful bodies to cease fighting among themselves and join in trampling on the weaker. You would have contrived a national education not for all, but for believers in the New Testament. The Jew and the unbeliever would be excluded from it though they would not the less be required to pay for it. I do not hear that their money is to be refused, that they are to be exempted from the school rate. Religious exclusion and inequality are as odious when practised towards minorities as majorities. I thought the principle of the Association had been that of justice, but I find it is that of being unjust to those alone who are not numerous enough to resist.

I cannot help remarking how much less confidence professed Christians appear to have in the truth and power of their principles than infidels generally have in theirs. Disbelievers in Christianity almost always hail the advance of public intelligence as

favourable to them ; the more informed and exercised a mind is, the more likely they account it to adopt their opinions : but I cannot find a trace of similar confidence in most of the professedly religious. If they hold their belief with the same full assurance as the others their disbelief, surely infidels and the children of infidels are those to whom, even more than to any others, they would be eager to give all instruction which could render their minds more capable of pursuing and recognizing truth. A person is without religious belief, or in other words is in their estimation in a state of the most pitiable, the most calamitous ignorance by which any one can possibly be afflicted, and for this reason they refuse him instruction, they refuse him knowledge and the cultivation and discipline of the intellect, as if they thought that mental cultivation could not possibly be favourable to Christianity, unless the mind is first strongly prepossessed on its behalf. Such sentiments as these are not complimentary to Christianity nor to the sincerity of their belief in it. Its greatest enemy could say nothing worse of it than that either ignorance or early prejudice is the soil it must have to flourish in, and that to instruct unbelievers, to make them rational and thinking beings, is but to confirm them in unbelief. I hoped that the founders of the Lancaster Association had been persons who thought that mental cultivation opens the mind to all truth, whether expressly taught or not. Let us hope that this conviction is still theirs and will guide and animate their labours ; but they have missed through pusillanimity a splendid opportunity for inscribing it on their banner and proclaiming it in the face of the world.

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