

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

**Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea**

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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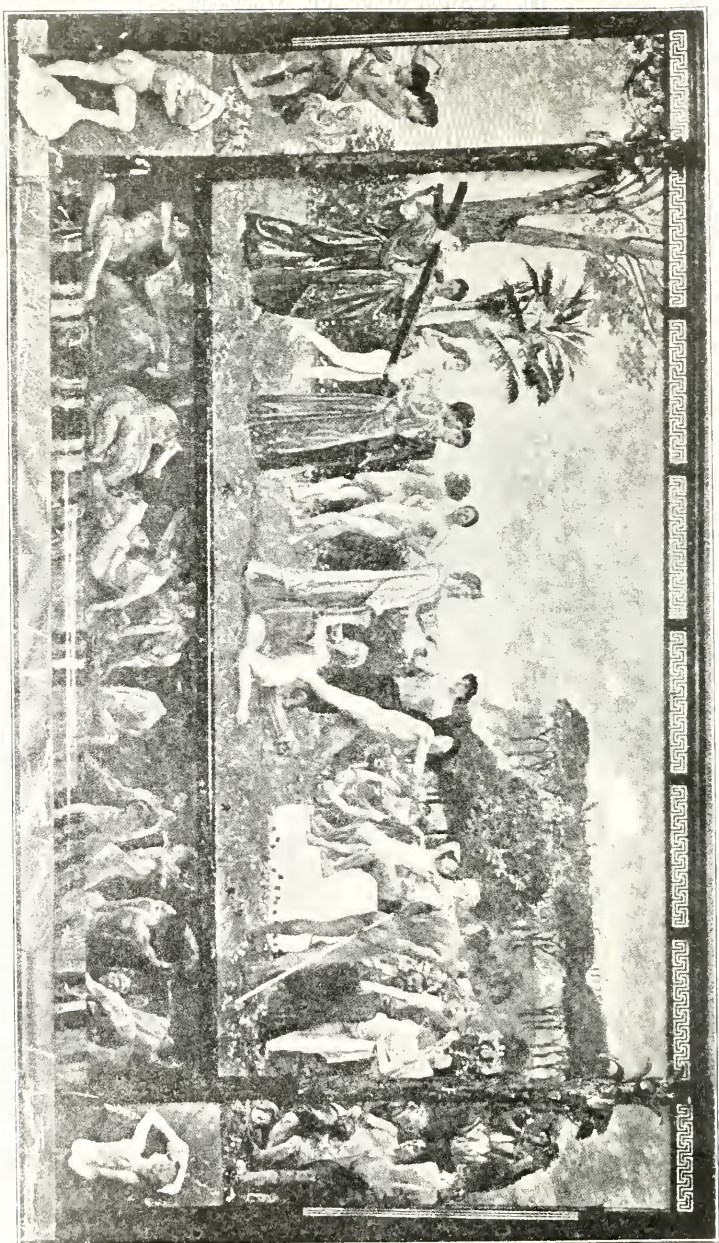
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CHRIST ON MT. OLYMPUS.

By Max Klinger, 1857-1920. (From *M. Schmid, Klinger*, p. 151.)

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THE BIBLE AND PUBLIC INSTRUCTION.

BY HENRY F. COPE.

THE question of the Bible in relation to public instruction will not down. At this time the Convention, called by the State of Illinois for the revision of the Constitution, is besieged by petitions for amendments which would either require or permit daily reading of the Bible. Several attempts have been made to secure legislation making such reading compulsory in New York State. The Pennsylvania law predicates a teacher's position on her reading the Bible daily! Resolutions favoring compulsory Bible-reading or calling for the study of the book in public schools are formulated almost daily in conferences and other meetings of Protestants, especially in those of the more emphatic Evangelical group. On the other hand, protests against such action come with no less vigor from groups of Jews and occasionally from the Roman Catholics. Often these take the form of appeals to the courts for injunctions restraining the public schools, as in Wisconsin, Illinois and Louisiana.¹ Occasionally Protestant and independent bodies go on record in opposition to required Bible-study in tax-supported institutions.² This indicates at least two things: that in spite of declining church membership and discouraging financial campaigns, religion is still, under some aspects, of vital interest to large numbers of people, and that American public opinion is decidedly sensitive on the subject of the use of the public schools for private purposes

¹ The Bible is excluded from the public schools in eleven States, either explicitly or by court decisions: Arizona, California, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, Washington and Wisconsin.

² Notably several very definite resolutions and "statements of principles" adopted by The Religious Education Association. The Northern Baptist Convention is on record as opposing. A special commission of the Chicago Church Federation unanimously adopted a platform opposing.

PROPAGANDA.

Why is this question raised? Why this agitation for the special study and use of one particular group of literary products? We have a fair measure of peace in public-school affairs so long as the Bible, and the Koran, and the sayings of Buddha, and the wisdom of Confucius, are left to the interest of voluntary groups and the care of private libraries. Except for the first, unfortunately, no one seems to be particularly solicitous as to whether children know them or not. But with the Bible it is different; it is the literature of the greatest propagandist faith the world has yet seen. That faith has not only sought to win children, it has been solicitous of their welfare. It is not strange that, when so many believe that the literature has vital importance they should seek to use every possible means of teaching it to children.

There are at least two distinct groups of persons persistently campaigning for the Bible in the public schools. They are:

I. *The Ecclesiastical Group.*—Many who regard the matter from the point of view of the churches have a variety of striking reasons:

1. They regard Biblical knowledge as in a class by itself. To them it possesses a special power. They are moved by the traditional conviction that there is a quality in the Bible which, by the contact of intellectual perception, performs some necessary part of the process of a person's salvation. The greater number of the most persistent advocates of the Bible in the public school treat the current King James one-volume edition as a fetish; they are Bibliolatrious. However, there are some who simply follow a conviction that Bible-study must be a "good thing," they believe that the Bible makes a definite contribution to personal character or they implicitly follow the tradition that this book has some virtue *per se* which other books do not have.

2. The ecclesiastical group find themselves unable to persuade children voluntarily to obtain this desired knowledge of the Bible. The churches succeed in getting not over twenty-five per cent. of the public school enrollment into any kind of schools of religion or of the Bible. They have totally failed in their program of Protestant Biblical teaching on a voluntary basis. Protestant schools of all kinds do not teach, even in their ineffective manner, more than fifteen of the forty-five millions of persons under twenty-five years of age in the United States.

3. They have been unwilling to bear the cost of placing this

instruction, upon which they insist, on an adequate educational basis. If the figures prepared by the Interchurch World Movement have any significance they show that the average Protestant church is spending less than two cents out of every dollar on its work of religious education, that these denominations expend seven mills *per capita per annum* on religious instruction, and that they provide teaching accommodations for less than ten per cent. of the school population. Demanding instruction in the Bible, while failing totally to give such instruction, they now turn to the schools and demand that their work be done at public expense.

4. There are those who clearly recognize the literary values of the Bible, and despairing of reaching any large proportion of the population or of securing educational efficiency in churches, with an open mind they are seeking some way by which, without offense to the conscience of any, public school children might obtain knowledge regarding the Bible.³

II. *A Group Composed Largely of Educators.*—These men and women recognize the Bible as literature. They recognize that its ideals and phrases have saturated English literature, that in many respects it is the source of great and fundamental ideals in our civilization. They lament the sectarian difficulties which, in some States, have totally excluded the Bible from the schools. They cannot conceive of an educational program for the people which wholly ignores this literature. Therefore they are seeking ways by which the Bible may have the same place that any other great literature would have. They are not agitating for its use in worship or for separate classes devoted to its study. It seems to them unfortunate that State laws and Supreme-Court decisions have discriminated against the Bible and prevented it from having that place which would be determined by its real human values.

THE DIFFICULTIES.

Now what are the difficulties in the way of the ordinary use of the Bible in the course of a child's education? Here is one of the world's masterpieces, or rather a unique collection of masterpieces; here is the child who has a right to his full literary and spiritual heritage, and here is the school; what could be more natural than to use the school to help the child to become the possessor

³ Note the systems known as "The North Dakota Plan," for accredited high-school study of the Bible in churches, and "The Gary Plan" for week-day instruction of school children in religion. Particulars may be obtained of the Religious Education Association, Chicago.

of this joy and wealth, this well of unfailing water? He will miss much and remain poor indeed if he does not know at least that of the Bible which has gone into his own literature; much of it will remain as in a foreign tongue, with unknown allusions and empty phrases so long as he is unfamiliar with the songs and speeches of the ancient Hebrews and the narratives of Jesus and his followers. And yet, wherever this deathless literature has been taught in public schools for children, no matter in what land, it has produced only strife, its values have been lost in the controversies and buried under the shattered weapons of polemics.

The fundamental difficulty is that Protestantism has made the Bible a sectarian book. It is almost impossible to use it without taking or accepting some divisive or sectarian position as to its origin, nature and authority. It is impossible to teach it in any way without conflict with private religious convictions. It is impossible to discuss its literary construction and history without giving offense to some person's religious convictions. The very people who are most urgently pressing for Bible-study in public schools would soon be raising a riot if teachers taught the Bible as they now teach any other literary material. These same persons would turn their energies to agitation to keep those profane pedagogical hands off their sacred book. So long as the Bible is the basis and court of appeals by which the various sects establish their separate creeds it has a place in a category apart from all other literature.

Next, it is impossible for the public schools to take over any specific religious responsibilities. The group who are urging the use of the Bible in the public schools for the purpose of religious culture should be reminded that the State encourages them in supporting other institutions for specifically religious purposes, that we have provision in the churches for religious work and that public agencies cannot engage therein. We have settled once and forever the question of religious freedom; we will not permit the civil power to be used for propagating special religious views—not, if we are wise, even our own views. We must protect the civil rights of every man in this respect; in the United States the civil rights of the minority are equal to the rights of the majority. We cannot compel the conscience of Catholic or Jew or Mohammedan.

When that position is stated one meets a singular answer in many Protestant circles. It is asserted that "the United States is a Christian nation," or that "the State is a divine institution." Of course, if this is true—that the State is a religious institution and,

specifically, a Christian institution—it has the obligation to definitely teach Christianity. Yet it might be questioned, even then, whether it should not use the Christian method of teaching its particular way. Can one imagine even the pragmatic Paul employing the police power to recruit his congregation? Is it a Christian method to use the civil arm to compel Jews to listen to the New Testament or to stigmatize themselves by permitted absence? But where did this notion of the democratic State as a religious institution arise? And what are its consequences? If only religious agitators were logical they would shudder at the conclusions of such a premise.

Further, the public school teachers are not prepared for teaching the Bible or religion. This is a highly specialized subject having no experts in the teachers' colleges and normal schools. No part of the teacher's training is projected on such instruction, and as to their fitness, one can imagine the complex situations that would arise in most communities as parents and pastors proceeded to examine, test and rectify the religious instruction that their Johns and Marys and Tonys and Gwendolyns were getting in the public schools.

No agreement is possible on any common body of religious literature or of creed. At least six different books have been prepared by joint committees of Catholics, Protestants and Hebrews for use in public schools but scarcely any use is made of them.⁴ They are a drug on the market simply because they are always open to sectarian objections; as a separate anthology such material does not become integrated into general instruction, and the body of literature upon which there is absolutely no controversy is very small and is already in the possession of practically all the people.

So far as the religious purpose is concerned, too, it is a waste of time to attempt to realize that purpose by the formal methods of the school. No one has yet established that the character and purpose of religion are achieved by instruction about the Bible or by any particular body of religious knowledge as such.

It is strange that Protestantism has, in all the heat of the controversy over the Bible and the schools, never stopped to ask the simple question whether anything would be gained if their purposes were successfully realized. Does any one know that children and young people become Christians through reading the Bible? Granting the validity of the literary arguments, the desirability of ac-

⁴ In a bibliography dealing with this whole subject, a list of books of Biblical selection for school use is given. It may be obtained, gratis, from The Religious Education Association, Chicago.

quainting all with this splendid precipitation of developing idealism, two serious problems stand out:

1. It is exceedingly difficult for young people to catch even an occasional gleam of the idealism; they cannot surmount the barriers of Oriental customs; the time-mould of ancient thought binds and holds the richest parts of this literature until wider knowledge and maturer thought unfold them to man or woman.

2. If the purpose in teaching the Bible is to develop the Christian type of character there is no special reason to suppose that Biblical information would have that effect. Here is the old scholastic error of general education, the attempt to determine life through information. Learning about ethics does not make the ethical life and learning about religion does not make the religious life.

The current Protestant program of religious instruction needs candid examination. It is in danger, at least, of repeating the tragedy of our high-school instruction in English. By attempting to drill the young in the minutiae of those ancient writings, by its dry textual exercises and its elaboration of learning on historical backgrounds and authors and languages it creates a definite aversion to the whole subject. It leaves students just where the school or college graduate often arrives after the courses in English, solemnly determined to have no more to do with the dreary subject. It effectively crushes enthusiasm with its academic pedantry; literary analyses inhibit affection. There are millions of American citizens with no enthusiasm for their own literature because they were dragged through deserts of dry facts and empty speculations year after year in classrooms. So also there are large numbers who never will have any enthusiasm for the Bible because of its associations with amateur efforts at packing-house methods of dealing with that literature.

The ideal of the present courses of Biblical instruction seems to be to "cover the Bible in the period of childhood." That is what the pedant in the schoolroom seeks to do with English, so that there are no undiscovered countries to beckon the later years, no possibilities of adventures and new enthusiasms. Happy the man who finds authors of whom he had never heard, treasures that had not been yet cataloged for him, and friends, in books, whose lives and motives had never been laid on the analyst's table! So ought it to be with the Bible; maturer years should find it new. There might be keen delight in discovering those bloody Kings and Chronicles if childhood had not suffered from them. That is precisely the experience of the Protestant who discovers the books of the Macca-

bees. It would seem, then, that both literary and religious considerations would bid one pause before urging that the Bible suffer from the intellectualistic, information-packing processes of the schools.

But, whatever the conclusion may be on such considerations, the fact remains that so long as the churches continue to make more of the Bible as a sectarian handbook than as literature, so long as their interests are primarily ecclesiastical and sectarian, the sectarians will remain too jealous of one another and the common people too wary to permit their taxes to be applied to private and divisive purposes. The churches might just as well abandon all efforts to compel the public schools to take over those duties of religious instruction which they have so carelessly considered and so seriously and persistently neglected. And until these purposes are changed the great mass of the people will remain impoverished for lack of at least this one storehouse of religious idealism.