

The Battle of Education in Holland.

Up to the commencement of the present century, Holland had no general system of popular instruction. The Catholics possessed hardly any schools, the Protestants but few, and those few very imperfect. The first impulse towards educational progress was given by a private Association, founded in 1784, whose object was to diffuse enlightenment among the lower classes by publishing good and cheap elementary books, founding public libraries, and establishing model schools. Finally it organised a committee of enquiry upon the best methods of public instruction, and in 1797 the city of Amsterdam adopted the plan of reform recommended by this Society.

In 1801 the celebrated Orientalist, Van der Palm, who was then Minister of public instruction, framed a measure which, slightly modified, became in 1806 the basis of a new organisation. The success which the law of 1806 obtained is attributed to its two main provisions; first, the establishment of a complete system of inspection for schools, and a rigorous examination for the teachers; and, secondly, the introduction of the entirely new fundamental principle of secular schools. The terms of this enactment were in effect these:—That the instruction was to be so organised as to further the acquirement of useful knowledge side by side with the development of the intellectual faculties, at the same time that the children were trained to the exercise of all the Christian virtues. That the children were not to be deprived of instruction in the dogmatic teaching of the communion to which they belonged, but that such instruction was not to be committed to the charge of the schoolmaster.

The ministers of the several religious bodies gladly accepted this condition, and the principle of secular schools was thenceforward established, under the belief that it would not only secure the cultivation of tolerance and charity, but was the only system under which dogmatic religion was likely to be adequately taught.

M. Van der Ende, the chief promoter of the law of 1806, thus describes its spirit:—"These elementary schools ought to be Christian, but neither Protestant nor Catholic. They ought to belong to no communion in particular, and to inculcate no positive dogma. The national school ought to be for the whole people."

M. Cousin, who visited these schools in 1836, found them realising this design. In this great schools at Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and the Hague, he saw Jews, Catholics, and Protestants of all denominations sitting on the same benches, and receiving the same instruction. The teaching of dogma was strictly excluded.

The law of 1806 remained in force until 1857. About this time a revision of it became necessary, in order to bring it into harmony with the constitution of 1848, which had proclaimed freedom of education. The principle of secular schools had then to sustain a violent attack. From the time that the Catholics had obtained equality of rights, they had employed their influence in endeavouring to banish religious instruction from the schools more completely than before, and they had succeeded in getting the Bible proscribed even as a reading-book. But the more completely they succeeded in enforcing a rigorous observance of the terms of the law of 1806, the greater became the uneasiness of the ultra-Protestants. Unable to contest the right of the Catholics to insist upon the instruction in a comprehensive (1) school being purely secular, they proceeded to attack the principle itself of a comprehensive school. They dubbed such schools "atheistical," "focuses of irreligion and immorality," and freely prophesied the annihilation through them of all national virtue. They excited, moreover, against the law of 1806 the fears of the Protestants, already alarmed at the fancied progress of the Roman Church. They were anxious at any price to introduce a "denominational"

system, under which each religious communion might have its special school.

In 1857 the question of the revision of the law was fully discussed by the Dutch Chambers. The debate was marked by the practical good sense of Dutchmen animated by much earnest religious feeling, and a large and liberal spirit of tolerance. It was granted that it was of the very highest importance to teach morality and religion as moving forces without which progress in civilization was impossible; but the intervention of the Church in the domain of the school was steadily resisted, and it was finally ruled that all instruction in dogma should be left to the ministers of the several communions, while the culture of the social virtues should be entrusted to the schoolmaster under the control of the civil power.

The law proposed by the Government laid it down as the duty of the schoolmaster to develop the germs of the social and Christian virtues. This last phrase the Catholics opposed on the ground that it might be made to authorise the introduction of religious dogma. The Protestants on the contrary were for maintaining it, as expressing the wishes of the majority in the nation. By the Jews, strange as it may seem, the presence of the word "Christian" was cordially welcomed. They saw in this provision, as it was defined by the Government, simply a design to secure the teaching of the high and pure morality which Christianity (as they said) brought with it, and which those who were not Christians could no less cordially accept, as being no other than that universal morality which appealed to every right conscience and every enlightened spirit.

The ultra-Protestant party had strongly advocated a denominational system. M. Van der Bruggen attempted to show them that divergence of religious opinion sprang chiefly from men having fundamentally different conceptions of what constituted religion. That for some Christianity meant Christian dogma, and that therefore they laid the chief stress upon articles of faith and the letter of revealed truth; but that in the minds of others Christianity was not so much a matter of the understanding, as an object of feeling and conscience. That in every Christian nation, notwithstanding the great speculative differences in opinion, there was a common basis of religious belief and moral feeling, and that it was upon this basis that secular instruction ought to build.

The liberal Protestants and the moderate Catholics united their strength, and the law was carried. Its principal provisions were as follows:—That in every electoral district elementary instruction was to be given in public schools, which should be provided in sufficient number for the wants of the population, and that children belonging to all communions were to be admitted without distinction. That the instruction was to aim at developing the social and Christian virtues. That the teachers were to abstain from teaching, doing, or permitting anything which might wound the religious sensibilities of the communions to which the children might belong. That the teaching of religion was left to be supplied by the different communions, to facilitate which the school premises were to be kept open out of school hours for the use of the pupils.

A competent judge, who has lately visited the schools of the Netherlands, reports that the methods are good, the masters devoted to their useful mission, and the results obtained eminently satisfactory, the law meeting with no serious opposition even in the Catholic provinces.

The parliament of Holland had not as yet made education compulsory, although a great number of its members have strongly advocated it. In this province of Groningen, however, one of the most enlightened in the kingdom, a compulsory enactment has been some years in force. It was noticed that in the country schools especially the number of scholars was continually diminishing, and therefore in 1839 a regulation was put in force, which obliged every father of a family to pay the usual school fee for every child between the ages of six and twelve, whether he was attending school or not, unless it could be shown that he was

(1) We use this term to denote a school which comprehends all denominations.