

Patrons of the school are periodically elected by the freeholders and householders at large,—which is not the case in Ireland. It is, therefore, inconsistent and absurd to profess approval of the National School system in Ireland, in regard to its regulations respecting religious instruction, and oppose the National School system of Upper Canada.

No. 5.

QUESTION of Religious Instruction, in connection with the System of Public Instruction in Upper Canada.

[From the Annual Report of the Chief Superintendent of Schools for 1851.]

The question of religious instruction has been a topic of voluminous and earnest discussion among statesmen and educationists in both Europe and America—has agitated more than one country on the continent of Europe—has hitherto deprived England of a national system of education, permitting to it nothing but a series of petty expedients in varying forms of government grants to certain religious denominations, while the great mass of the labouring population is unreached by a ray of intellectual light, and is “perishing for lack of knowledge” amidst the din of sectarian war about “religious education,” and under the very shadows of the cathedral and the chapel. If I have not made this question a prominent topic of remark in my annual reports, it is not because I have undervalued or overlooked its importance. In my first and preliminary report on a system of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada, I devoted thirty pages to the discussion of this subject (pp. 22-52,) and adduced the experience and practice of most educating countries in Europe and America respecting it. In preparing the draft of the school law, I sought to place it where it had been placed by the authority of Government, and by the consent of all parties, in Ireland—as a matter of regulation by a National Board, and with the guards which all have considered essential. Those regulations have been prepared and duly sanctioned, and placed in the hands of all school authorities; nor have I failed from time to time to press their importance upon all parties concerned. It is however, worthy of remark, that in no instances have those parties who have thought proper to assail the school system, and myself personally, on the question of religious instruction, quoted a line from what I have professedly written on the subject, or from the Regulations, which I have recommended, while such parties have more than once pretended to give my views by quoting passages which were not at all written in reference

to this question, and which contained no exposition of my views on it.

As some prominence has been given to this question during the year by individual writers, and some vague statements and notions put forth, I will offer a few remarks on it in concluding this report.

1. My first remark is, that the system of Common School instruction should, like the legislature which has established, and the government that administers, it, be non-sectarian and national. It should be considered in a provincial, rather than in a denominational point of view—in reference to its bearing upon the condition and interests of the country at large, and not upon those of particular religious persuasions as distinct from public interests, or upon the interests of one religious persuasion more than those of another. And thus may be observed the difference between a mere sectarian and a patriot—between one who considers the institutions and legislation and government of his country in a sectarian spirit, and another who regards them in a patriotic spirit. The one places his seat above his country, and supports or opposes every public law or measure of government, just as it may or may not promote the interest of his own sect, irrespective of the public interests, and in rivalry with those of other sects; the other views the well-being of his country as the great end to be proposed and pursued, and the sects as among the instrumentalities tributary to that end. Some indeed have gone to the extreme of viewing all religious persuasions as evils to be dreaded, and as far as possible proscribed; but an enlightened and patriotic spirit rather views them as holding and propagating in common the great principles of virtue and morality, which form the basis of the safety and happiness of society; and therefore as distinct agencies more or less promotive of its interests—their very rivalships tending to stimulate greater activity, and therefore, as a whole, more beneficial than injurious. I think a national system of public instruction should be in harmony with this national spirit.

2. I remark again, that a system of public instruction should be in harmony with the views and feelings of the great body of the people, especially of the better educated classes. I believe the number of persons in Upper Canada who would theoretically or practically exclude Christianity in all its forms as an essential element in the education of the country, is exceedingly small, and that more than nine-tenths of the people regard religious instruction as an essential and vital part of the education of their offspring. On this, as well as on higher grounds,

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