

Conscience clause in Indian  
Schools and colleges

**A CONSCIENCE CLAUSE IN INDIAN—  
SCHOOLS & COLLEGES.=====**

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A year ago a paper by the writer on this subject was printed for private circulation. Discussions in the press and elsewhere in the intervening months have led the writer to a most important modification of the conclusion reached in that paper. While the earlier part of this paper is in large measure a reproduction of its predecessor, the attention of those familiar with that pamphlet is drawn to the argument of the last 6 pages of this paper. Both pamphlets are published by the generosity of friends.

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the West, July 1917.)*

A GRAVE question confronts those who are engaged in, or are supporters of, missionary education in India. Hitherto the British Government's attitude to religious education in India has been perfectly simple. It gives financial aid to all sound education, and asks no question as to its religious character. The people of India constitute one-fifth of the entire population of the globe. And in the vast task of educating the immense population under its control the Indian Government is prepared to give (and for more than half a century has given) liberal financial grants to any school or college, provided by public or private enterprise, that can show decent educational results. In the allotment of these grants Government takes no notice of any religious instruction which may or may not be included in the curriculum. This attitude it defines as "religious neutrality." As a matter of fact these "aided" institutions constitute the larger part of the educational system of India. Amongst "aided" institutions are to be found a number of schools and colleges, endowed by the generosity of individuals or local public bodies, where for the most part no religious teach-

ing is given, and many Mission institutions, all of whose pupils receive regular Christian instruction. In the small but increasing number of schools and colleges maintained directly by Government, the education is exclusively secular.

A new and momentous departure was taken when, in 1915, Government introduced into the charter of the new Hindu University of Benares a requirement that all non-Hindu students should be exempted from the necessity of attending religious instruction. A "conscience clause" was thus for the first time introduced into the Indian educational system. This has given rise to a novel and growing agitation to induce Government to require the adoption of a similar "conscience clause" by all educational institutions receiving grants from public funds. The matter is now being debated in the Imperial and Provincial Legislative Councils. The agitation is being led by Mr. S. Sastri, Mr. Gokhale's successor as Secretary of the Servants of India Society. In a pamphlet on this subject Mr. Sastri explains that by a "conscience clause" he means an enactment by Government that it shall be permissible to withdraw any pupil from the periods devoted to religious instruction in any institution receiving aid from public funds.

Mr. Sastri enumerates four grounds on which such a demand is called for :—

1. That it is a violation of the religious neutrality of Government to make any grant from public funds to an institution which makes religious instruction an essential part of its course ;

2. That it is an illegitimate use of taxpayers' money to devote any part of it to an institution which exists to propagate a religion of which many, possibly a large majority, of the taxpayers disapprove ;

3. That if a conscience clause is justified or requisite in English schools, it is still more so in India ;

4. That it is destructive of the moral integrity and self-respect of Indian students that for the sake of the material benefit of the education promised they should have to sit through religious teaching of which in their heart of hearts they disapprove. Mr. Sastri argues that it is unfair to force a student to choose between no education at all or education in an alien religion.

Certain obvious replies to some of Mr. Sastri's arguments at once occur.

1. Government would give another interpretation of the meaning of religious neutrality. Their education minutes have over and over again laid down the position that it is the business of Government to encourage sound education anywhere, irrespective of the religious teaching with which it may be accompanied. They have defined religious neutrality to consist in "an entire abstinence from interference with the religious instruction conveyed in the schools assisted." Accordingly representatives of Government are instructed that "in their periodical inspections no notice whatsoever should be taken of the religious doctrines which may be taught in any school." This is at least as intelligible a definition of religious neutrality as that given by Mr. Sastri. It means that Government is anxious to enlist the co-operation of all religious or other bodies of whatever kind in the overwhelming task of providing India with sound education. And the public funds are granted in respect of the sound general education thus imparted, and with absolute indifference to its religious character. Government assistance is open on equal terms to all religious bodies that will co-operate in the vast enter-

prise of educating India. If there be a grievance it is due solely to the apathetic failure of the Hindu and Musalman communities to avail themselves of the opportunity thus offered. The remedy is obvious.

2. No objection can rightly be taken to Government's use of money paid by Hindu and Musalman taxpayers, provided it can be shown that the money is wisely expended for the public good. Government's eye, more particularly in a backward country like India, must be on the public benefit conferred rather than on the wishes of the often uninstructed taxpayers. It must, however, be admitted that this is not a very democratic sentiment ! A more effective line of reply is that the use made by Hindu and Musalman parents of missionary education, even when cheaper education of a non-missionary character is to be had, is evidence that many of the taxpayers do approve of this use of their money. How many of us have over and over again had letters from non-Christian parents asking that their sons may be taught the Bible ! While however, Government may be justified in the line it takes there are many missionaries who would feel that as Christians, and in a matter touching religious conscience, they were not justified in receiving money from Hindu and Musalman taxpayers in an area where Hindu and Musalman opinion disapproved of this use of their money.

3. With regard to the analogy of the conscience clause legislation in England, I must confess myself not very much impressed by the arguments of those who maintain that there is no parallel. They appear to me to savour somewhat of special pleading. The circumstances may be rather different, but the principle is the same ; and it is the principle that is at issue. One difference is, of

course, that in England education is compulsory ; but something very like compulsion exists in India, wherever the choice is between Christian education and no education at all. I believe that in all honesty the two cases stand or fall together. I am prepared to treat them so myself.

4. When the plea of self-respect and moral integrity is raised, I believe that in regard to Hindus the character of their religion offers an almost complete reply. A Hindu may assimilate and believe almost any doctrine, provided he observes the laws of caste. A man may be an atheist, polytheist, pantheist, or monotheist, and still be a Hindu. Grievance could only be urged if missionary education attempted any kind of coercion in regard to breach of caste rules, or were disrespectful or insulting in its references to Hinduism.

But this reply to Mr. Sastri's argument would not hold good in the case of Musalman students.

We pass from an examination of the grounds upon which Mr. Sastri bases his demand to a consideration of some of the principal reasons which are urged against the introduction of a conscience clause.

1. It is said that loyalty to our missionary commission makes it impossible for us to give ourselves to the work of education unless we may deliver the Christian message to all our pupils. As against this, however, there are those who would say that loyalty to our missionary commission does not preclude us from recognising that the atmosphere of voluntariness on the part of those to whom we give our message is of great value for, or even essential to, the success of our mission. Personally, I should be well content to teach in a College the bulk of whose students



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came voluntarily to religious teaching. And I should only prefer that all should come by rule so long as I am able to make the students feel the essential voluntariness of their membership of the missionary institution. It is my custom in my own college frequently to remind the students that while I am not prepared to teach except on the basis of Christian education, I do not wish to give Christian teaching to any who are unwilling to receive it, and that I am ready to arrange at any moment for their transfer, free of cost, to a non-Christian institution, if they so desire. No single student has yet taken advantage of this offer. I speak as one who has had experience of both methods. I have proved in thirteen years of work in a hostel at Allahabad that, given an adequate staff, we can rely on being able to attract the majority of our students to voluntary religious teaching, despite the most able and determined Hindu opposition. During those years at least I was not disloyal to my missionary commission. But for such work we must be adequately staffed. It will be urged that not all have the attractive gift. In reply to which I would venture the opinion that the man who can only get his class together by compulsion will not do much with it when he has got it in front of him. Only it needs to be said that in the case quoted we were not responsible for the general education of our students, and there was no question of a school or college time-table and discipline: a very material consideration. Be this as it may, the point of importance for which I wish to plead is that, whatever be our method, our Christian propaganda shall be really free at every point—that it shall never rely on compulsion as a weapon. To offer a student the choice between Christian education or no education is virtual compulsion.

We are here to preach Christ to those who will listen and receive : not to an audience collected by compulsion.

While on the point of this supposed incompatibility of a conscience clause with our missionary commission, it may be well to remind alike the advocates and the opponents of such a clause that, in dealing with the critics of educational Missions at home, we are never tired of insisting on the missionary value of our work quite outside the Scripture class-room. We maintain that there are many ways of delivering the Christian message other than the Bible lesson.

2. We believe religion to be essential to a complete or worthy education. Believing this, we claim *our* freedom too, and that we shall not be expected to give ourselves to an education which omits that which we regard as the most potent and valuable influence in, and the regulating factor of, the whole. Just as a doctor will refuse to treat a patient who will not follow his regimen, so we refuse to waste our time over pupils who, desiring some only of the benefits of Christian education, refuse that which is vital to the whole. Regarding character as the chief element in education, we will not give ourselves to the futile task of education without religion. To make that excision would be to cut the nerve of the enthusiasm which gives our education its distinctive worth. You must take our education whole, or not at all. True, Roman Catholic institutions are sometimes instanced as an example of the possibility of separating religious teaching from the rest of education. I will only say that I remain unconvinced by their example. And we are not alone in the value we attach to religious education. Recent educational pronouncements of all kinds in India reiterate this conviction.

It would surely be an amazing step if, at this time, when all authorities seem to be agreed as to the calamitous effect of irreligious education in India, Government were to initiate a policy which will suggest that it attaches less value than formerly to religious education, and which may lead to a very serious curtailment of such education in the country.

3. It is feared Mission supporters at home will withdraw their help from schools and colleges all of whose pupils do not receive Christian teaching. This is by no means universally true. The hostel at Allahabad in which I worked for many years received, in the opinion of many, considerably more than its due share of home support, though all Christian teaching was purely voluntary. Other Missions have had a similar experience.

4. A conscience clause leading up to a voluntary period will introduce into our institutions an element that does not harmonise with the genius of their regimen and discipline. In the present overloaded condition of our time-tables, the option of a free period will present an irresistible bribe. For what our pupils desire is, not education, but to pass university examinations. The results will be most prejudicial to discipline. Strikes against authority will take the easy form of abstention *en masse* from the Scripture period.

5. There is a very large class of persons upon whom the introduction of a conscience clause will throw a quite intolerable strain. There are tens of thousands of non-Christian parents and pupils in India who desire the benefits of Christian education. They believe it to furnish the only safeguard of moral character against the destructive influences of modern secular education. But few of

these will have the moral stamina to resist the pressure of their co-religionists who will urge them to join in demanding exemption from Christian teaching, once the right to exemption has been granted. The mass of timid but grateful listeners to the Gospel message may not be thrown by us to the wolves of a tyrannical agitation, just because they are weak. It is these who need to have secured to them freedom of conscience.

6. The legislative enactment of a conscience clause is open to very serious objection on grounds of public policy. Government will be running the gravest risks if it introduces into its educational system this revolutionary experiment. It will mark the beginning of Government interference in matters of religion. If pupils may claim exemption from the Christian teaching given in the Scripture period, they may surely claim a similar exemption when the honest interpretation of some passage in English literature or history or of a problem in philosophy requires the missionary to give no less decided Christian teaching in other periods. And what of the propagandist influence of life in a school or college hostel? At what point is Government interference to stop in its effort to secure the pupil immunity from Christian influence and teaching? This is a slippery incline.

We must make it absolutely plain to all that the introduction of a conscience clause, *if it results in the withdrawal of any considerable body of pupils from religious teaching*, will lead inevitably and immediately to a wholesale closing down of missionary institutions: a result which even those who are agitating for a conscience clause would view as a calamity to the cause of Indian education. In other words, from the point of view of those who desire



that Mission schools shall continue, but that non-Christian pupils shall not attend the Scripture periods, the introduction of a conscience clause will be either resultless or disastrous. And we must draw the attention of the authorities to the wide opening such legislation will offer to the agitator for the introduction into the generally calm waters of Mission colleges and schools of the disturbing elements of religious agitation and disunion, and that at a time when there is general agreement as to the imperative necessity for strengthening religious education.

For more than a decade educational thought in India has been tending decisively towards a consensus opinion that secular education must give way to a system in which religion is allowed its proper place in the making of moral character. Is Government now suddenly to turn round on this advance with a pronouncement that religious teaching is a matter of indifference? India's religious divisions leave only three courses open to Government in this regard: patronage of one of the competing religions, a neutrality which is equally benevolent to all the religions, or the secularisation of education. Can it be doubted which of these courses is the right one to adopt? Is it to be the role of the British Raj to secularise the religious soul of India?

To return to the main argument. It is necessary to distinguish clearly between the general principle that of our Christian propaganda must throughout be based, not on coercion, but on voluntary consent, and the particular proposal to realise this principle by the legislative introduction of a conscience clause. While very serious objections are seen to hold against the introduction of a conscience clause, the principle of voluntariness stands rooted impre-

gnably in Christian freedom.\* In matters of religious loyalty we cannot but disapprove of the application of any measure of coercion. There are few causes for which, as missionaries, we strive more earnestly than to secure freedom of conscience in religious matters for the Hindus and Musalmans who are attracted to Christ. We must be scrupulous to give such freedom ourselves, or we shall be pulling down with one hand what we are building up with the other. Moreover, we would desire in this matter to apply to others the treatment we would wish meted out to us if we had, *e. g.*, to choose between the education of our children in schools where instruction in Roman Catholic doctrine formed part of the course, or no education at all.

Is the granting of a conscience clause the only way on which to secure the voluntary principle? We think not. In the first place, it needs to be pointed out that in the great majority of cases this principle is already secure. Except in "single school" areas (*i. e.*, areas where none but missionary education is available) missionary education is already actually voluntary. Where accommodation in a non-missionary institution is available, the pupil's choice of the Mission institution with its religious teaching is free and voluntary. Nor can comparative cheapness of missionary education be advanced as practically involving coercion of the poor student. In most of the cases that have come under my observation the fees charged by Mission schools and colleges are at least as high as those of competing institutions. Very often they are higher. Here, in Calcutta, *e. g.*, after Presidency College, three Mission colleges charge higher fees than any other in the city. Yet we have to refuse four applicants for every one we admit.

Nobly has the Bihar Representative Council of Missions resolved that "as those who have ever striven to inculcate in our pupils the duty of loyalty to conscience, we welcome the evidences of its growth in the people of this land, and we desire at all times to show the greatest consideration for genuine conscientious conviction, and to do nothing to cause men to ignore it."

In fact, it may, we think, be stated that missionary opinion will be unanimous in affirming that two principles of equally sacred cogency must determine our policy in this matter. First, nothing can be allowed to qualify the radically Christian character of whatever education we impart. And secondly, the acceptance of that Christian education must depend, never on virtual compulsion, but on voluntary choice.

We may put this position in another way, and lay it down that no solution of the problem under consideration can be satisfactory which does not

(1) leave room for entire loyalty to our missionary commission ;

(2) cohere with sound educational method and discipline ;

(3) commend itself as fair and honourable to the Indian conscience ;

(4) present a line of policy that Government can adopt.

Now the introduction of a conscience clause, while consistent with the last but one of these tests, is in at least possible collision with all the other three. Can a solution be found that satisfies all four conditions? We think it can. *And the way lies, not in a conscience clause, but in the provision by the authorities of an alternative institution wherever Christian education is not desired.*

We must make it plain to the Government and the public that missionaries are not responsible for the general education of India. We are here to give Christian education to those who are willing to receive it. Government cannot demand of us that the education we give shall be less than Christian. Where Christian education is not desired the Government's business is to provide an alternative school. We claim no monopoly anywhere. *We are prepared to surrender grants if they are needed for the alternative institution.* We want no unwilling pupils when we teach the glorious good news. We repeat : Government may everywhere provide an alternative to the Christian school ; where this is honestly desired we shall welcome it ; but Government cannot require us to mutilate the education to the giving of which we have freely devoted our lives.

For the purpose of this issue missionary institutions fall into two clearly distinguished groups.

1. Areas where the Hindu or Musalman pupil has before him the choice between entering a missionary or a neutral institution. The great mass of missionary education, at any rate in the higher grades, will be found to fall under this category. In order to make the choice more genuinely free, I wish we might agree everywhere to raise our fees to at least the level of the competing non-missionary institutions. If then missionary education be found to attract because of the excellence it derives from its religious basis, the parent cannot in reason ask to be provided with the fruit if he refuses the root from which it springs. When conditions as to fees, etc., have been thus equalised, we shall have impregnable ground from which to resist the introduction of a conscience clause into

institutions which the pupil only enters because he freely chooses them.

2. There fall to be considered areas in which the only school or college really open to the would-be pupil is a missionary institution. We must be faithful to our principle that we only give Christian teaching when its acceptance is really voluntary.

If in such an area the demand arises for an education that is not Christian, we shall make it clear that we welcome the principle of an alternative institution ; and if we are satisfied that the demand is an honest one, we shall do what we can to facilitate the project, even if this involve the sacrifice of our grants from Government. Our point is this : agitation must have as its *object the provision of non-Christian education for those who desire it, not the coercion of the missionary into giving an education in which he does not believe.* What missionary opinion is really out against is dishonest agitation : agitation which, unable or unwilling to pay the cost of providing the education it wants, seeks to squeeze non-Christian education out of Christian charity. But an agitation which is willing to bear its share of the burden in providing the education it desires is not dishonest. From it neither Government nor missionaries have anything to fear. Let us repeat : agitation must be, not for a conscience clause, but for an alternative school.

Such an agitation can only fail on one ground : that the proportion of pupils for whom non-Christian education is desired is too small to form the nucleus of an alternative school, which means that in this area the large majority desire the continuance of Mission education. In that case Government can hardly be expected to interfere and to

prefer the wishes of a small minority to those of the great majority. But in that case also it is open to the missionary, if satisfied of the honesty of the demand, of his own free grace to extend to the dissenters the benefits of a conscience clause. For, being *ex hypothesi* a mere handfu their withdrawal from the Scripture periods will not materially affect the Christian character of the institution. The moment this minority attains considerable proportions the missionary will say : "I cannot any longer grant this exemption without impairing the Christian character of the school. You must now get the authorities to give you an alternative institution." And it makes all the difference in the world to the happiness and smoothness of the interior discipline and exterior environment of the school whether a conscience clause is granted by the free grace of the missionary or is demanded by prescriptive right. For, let it again be said, agitation can only demand, not a conscience clause, but another school.

Two objections may be brought against this' solution from opposite directions. It may be said that, in places where a second school is impossible, it leaves these small but honest minorities at the mercy of the missionary. Yes, but this missionary will have upon him, if the policy outlined in this paper be adopted, the pressure of the pronouncement of the whole missionary body in favour of real voluntariness in all religious teaching. There will always be hard cases ; but the procedure outlined above will surely reduce them to a minimum. Or, conversely, it will be argued that, once the missionary body has pronounced in favour of entire voluntariness in this matter, agitation will take the form of demanding a second school as a cloak for extorting the concession of a con-

science clause. Yes, but such agitation must always run the risk of a success larger than it bargains for. If more than a mere handful join in the demand, the Mission will insist on an alternative institution or else withdraw; the agitators will in any case be left saddled with the maintenance of a school. The Mission can at every point compel the agitation to be honest, and to bear the penalty of success. Throughout it needs to be remembered that Mr. Sastri and his party are too anxious to cover India with education to view with anything but dismay the withdrawal of Mission schools from India. They desire earnestly the continuance of Mission education, only they would have it emasculated of Christianity. We forgo entirely the strategic advantage this fact confers on us. We are anxious, not to win, but only to do the right.

The position we plead for is an unequivocal declaration that our Christian teaching shall at every point be really voluntary, and an equally uncompromising insistence that the public cannot coerce missionaries into giving their lives to impart an education in which they do not believe. The method is clear recognition of the fact that, where Christian education is not desired, it is the business of the public to provide it, and the retention by the Mission of the right to grant a conscience clause in the small residue of cases when an alternative is impossible.