

THE SCHOOL QUESTION IN BELGIUM

JULIAN PIERCE
Washington, D.C.

The solution of the school question in Belgium is the subject of a recent comprehensive address by M. Jules Destrée, Belgian Minister of Sciences and Arts.

The Belgian primary schools are administered by the authorities of the communes. The central government, however, contributes large subsidies to the support of the primary schools and establishes certain requirements to which the primary schools must conform. The administration of the subsidies, including the national public-school inspection service, falls to the Minister of Sciences and Arts.

For fifty years or more the so-called school war has been waged in Belgium over religious courses in the public schools and state control of private religious schools. Religious instruction in the public schools was established by the law of 1895 and has been in operation since that date. Parents who do not wish their children to take the religious courses may have them exempted.

Political control of the public schools has also been a major issue for many years in Belgium. In politics the school war is reflected in the activities of the Catholic or Clerical party and of the Liberal or anti-clerical party. Each of these parties has undertaken to use the public schools to impress the minds of the children with its political principles.

The present political situation in Belgium gives added interest to M. Destrée's address.

The Belgium government is of the parliamentary form, the cabinet being chosen from the members of the Chamber of Deputies. The present chamber is composed of seventy-one Catholics, seventy Socialists, thirty-four Liberals, and ten non-party members. The parliamentary elections occur on November 20. There is a possibility that the Socialist party may supersede the Catholic as the largest party in the chamber. Should this happen, the Socialist party

will take the prime ministership and the general administration of the government, including its educational system. Consequently M. Destrée's analysis of the school question and its solution from the Socialist viewpoint is of more than passing interest.

M. Destrée is one of the four Socialist members of the present Belgian cabinet, having held the portfolio of Minister of Sciences and Arts since the organization of the "government of democratic union" in November, 1918.

An understanding of the dispute and the importance which the disputants attach to it is necessary in the search for the solution of the school question. Therefore M. Destrée gives this historical summary of the matter:

During the first revision of the Belgian constitution in 1830 the rulers, recruited solely from the taxpaying electors of the bourgeoisie, experienced a temporary period of relative harmony. They were all preoccupied in assuring the fruits of the Revolution. Moreover, they were united by a community of interests. Then divergencies of opinion accentuated themselves and gave birth to two organized parties, the Liberal party and the Clerical party.

The school question was the basic reason for the manifestation of this distinction and its persistence. All the other differences were unimportant; the incomprehension of the needs and rights of the people was about equal in the two bourgeois parties.

The Liberals, however, saw the importance of primary education and wished to separate it from religious influences. The Clericals, less convinced of the benefits of the wide diffusion of instruction, insisted that it should be strongly stamped with the impression of the confessional. Since 1842 law has followed law, unceasingly renewing the dispute and always exhibiting the divergence of opinion.

Primary education was a communal institution. The Liberals were in control of the large cities. Consequently schools multiplied there and always sought to bring victory for Liberal ideas in spite of legal obstacles. On the other hand, the Catholics, who were reactionary, developed and multiplied the schools over which they were the masters. Thus, thanks to constitutional liberty, there arose two opposing school systems, the so-called "free" schools and the "official" schools,¹ with the strange consequence that when the Catholics were in power and had control of public instruction they exerted themselves to impede and curtail it to the profit of the competing schools.

This struggle has endured for more than half a century and is not yet over. The claims it has made on both parties for zeal, energy, and sacrifice are

¹ The primary schools of Belgium under the administration of the local authorities and subsidized by the central government are called "official" schools. The private Catholic parochial schools are called "free" or "Catholic" or "confessional" schools.

incalculable. It has poisoned all our public life. It has engendered, even in the villages, lamentable civil discords, suffering, and persecutions of all sorts. It has made irreducible enemies out of citizens who otherwise would have understood, esteemed, and assisted each other.

After pointing out that the contest over the school question is responsible for the slow progress of the democratic ideas in the Catholic party, and that it is the desire to retain control of the public schools which maintain the Catholic party in Belgium, although that party has disappeared from other European countries, M. Destrée declares that a real solution of the problem cannot be effected until the school question divests itself of certain illusions which have caused the continued quarrels. The first illusion is the idea that the public school is neutral, tolerant, and free from religious influence.

Do not forget that public instruction is under the administration of the commune. In cities with a Liberal administration it occasionally has neutral qualities. It is these occasional instances which its enthusiastic supporters have in mind. But let them enlarge the field of their observation; let them include the innumerable communes where the administration is Catholic, and there they will find different conditions.

Quite recently my attention was directed to a public school in which an altar to Saint Joseph was set up and where they recited prayers for souls in purgatory! What more could they do in a Catholic school? I could multiply these examples.

I am convinced that, taken as a whole, public instruction does not possess sufficient merit to warrant the feverish solicitude of certain people. The public school does not escape the influence of local environment, and certain public schools in the Flemish region are more religious than are certain Catholic schools in the industrial communes of the Walloon provinces.

Another illusion is the much praised quality of the public schools. While there are some public schools as well as some Catholic schools that are excellent, M. Destrée is disposed to believe that "taken as a whole, the two educational systems are about equivalent—equivalent in mediocrity."

But the Belgian Minister of Education positively declares that both the Catholic and Liberal parties have sought to use the primary schools to make voters for their respective political parties. This partisan policy, however, is based upon another illusion which must be cast aside in the Socialist solution of the school question.

Those who control the schools control the nation, is a saying that is often repeated. To my mind this is an illusion which close observation of the facts will demonstrate as such. I know this belief is widespread. Liberals as well as Catholics share in the opinion. But I am convinced that it does not correspond with reality and that it has been considerably overvalued.

To attribute to me the thought that primary education is unimportant would be to misunderstand me completely. I simply say that it has not the decisive importance which is too often accorded to it. Even in the bourgeois class we see former students of the Jesuits among the well-known anti-clericals; this clearly shows that in their intellectual development other elements than the lessons of their professors have intervened. It is still more evident in the working class, where school impressions are quickly effaced by the impressions of the workshop and the factory and where the life of the adult singularly transforms the recollections of the child.

It was for the most part generations who graduated from the schools of the *Petits Frères* that made the French Revolution and pushed official impiety to its last limits. For the past, this example is sufficiently instructive.

As for the present, if the school controls the nation, how explain the fact that although nine-tenths of the scholars take the school courses in religious instruction their religious training does not reflect itself in the electoral body, for only four-tenths of the electors vote for the Catholic party? To be exact, in the last general election held in November, 1919, 36.64 per cent of the votes were cast for the candidates of the Catholic party. The discrepancy occurs because other influences than those of the school come into action in determining the views of the electors.

Born of the desire of the opposing bourgeois parties to assure themselves a voting constituency, the school question, therefore, has its origin in an error of judgment as to the political importance of primary education in social life. It is an illusion—a bourgeois illusion.

M. Destrée finds his keynote for Labor's solution of the school question in the fact that the working people of Belgium take but little interest in religious instruction in the schools. "It is always the bourgeois elements who carry on the propaganda to increase the exemptions." In spite of this propaganda the number of exemptions reaches but 33,432 out of 960,818 scholars.

This emphatically demonstrates that the peasants and industrial workers have other preoccupations than the consideration of religious courses in the schools. How right the workers are! How many other questions affect them more directly! One thing is certain. The Clerical-Liberal question has too long masked the social question; and for the proletariat the latter is much more important than the former.

At the same time, the Socialist party must guard against the illusions which are at the base of the school war.

We must resolutely renounce making use of the schools for political purposes.

Both Liberals and Clericals have undertaken to use the primary schools to make Liberals and Clericals. We, on the other hand, undertake to make Socialists; but not by means of the primary school. An educational institution should have an educational and not a political object, either open or dissimulated. We shall endeavor to use the public school to make well-informed citizens, equipped for the struggles of life. It is these citizens who will later, and outside of the schools, charge themselves with the function of showing the voters the political party which they should support.

Here is what the working people expect of the school: instruction, education, preparation for life. This and nothing more.

Some say the child belongs to the parents; others affirm that he belongs to the state. These views are equally false.

The child cannot be the property of anyone. He is a being with respect to whom both the parents and the state have rights; but above all, and because of the child's weakness, they have duties. It is in the order of nature that the parents fulfill these duties. It may happen, however, that, unconsciously or through inability, the parents neglect to perform their duties. Then the care of the state intervenes. Among its necessary attributes the state includes protection for the weak as well as the development of productive energies. It cannot abandon to parents the right to determine whether their children shall be instructed; social interest rises above individual caprice. Primary instruction must therefore be made legally obligatory. This was done in Belgium by the law of May 18, 1914, and the principle is no longer opposed.

Rights of the state, the obligation for instruction on the one side, but liberty of instruction, free choice of the school by the parents on the other side—this is the conciliation which has inspired the legislator. It seems to me that this policy should be approved.

Suppression of the private religious schools, advocated by certain ultra anti-clericals, should have no place in Belgium's public policy. Above all, such a policy is foreign to the underlying principles of the Socialist party of Belgium and consequently cannot figure in the Socialist solution of the school question.

I have never been one of those who exaggerate the rights of the state to the point of monopoly. That is a sectarian pretension which leads to insupportable tyrannies. It has never had more than a few supporters in Belgium, a country attached by its Constitution as well as its traditions to freedom of thought and liberty of education.

There are Socialists who sometimes have a tendency to exaggerate the importance of power. Desirous of hastening the progress of the ideas which are dear to them, they believe in the possibility of accomplishing it by compulsion—a dangerous course, which quickly ends in tyranny. Human happiness is not brought about against the will of mankind. In certain cases the law should impose restraint; it becomes inefficacious as soon as it passes beyond what the nation is capable of accepting. As for me, I cannot separate socialism from liberty. Especially in the domains which touch conscience and thought, liberty should be scrupulously respected.

If it is proper, therefore, to consider education as a public service, the same as justice, the army, the police, and the railroads are public services, it is also proper not to demand the authority of the state except within the limits compatible with liberty of opinion.

Moreover, suppression of the “free” schools is unthinkable from the point of view of the children themselves. Compulsory education implies enough schools to accommodate all the scholars. As a matter of fact, the number of schools is scarcely sufficient now, even when the confessional schools are included.

If there were enough intolerants to desire the suppression of the Catholic schools with enough power to realize their desire, they would thereby make the application of the compulsory school attendance law impracticable and throw thousands of children into the streets and its hazards; moreover, the children would be mostly poor children. A Socialist, free thinker though he may be, cannot consent to such an enormity. He must therefore tolerate the confessional school.

I go still further. To my mind “tolerate” is an improper term. “Accept” is the word to use. Accept the confessional school without preconceived hostility. Accept it as a fact which it is vain to wish does not exist. Accept it as worthy of respect since its existence and prosperity result from the desires of thousands of compatriots. Accept it as useful, because it supplements the numerical insufficiency of public education.

We Socialists have other things to do than to take up the traditions and rancors of the Liberal party. On the question of private religious schools we should declare that we shall neither persecute nor annoy them. Why not hope that by this attitude we shall inspire as a consequence a less hostile attitude and that one day, instead of being the malignant competitor of public school education, the parochial schools will become the cordial collaborator?

If we become permeated with these hopes we begin to perceive the solution sought, the bridge across the abyss. Education, regardless of whether it is parochial or public, must be made a great national enterprise. This nationalization can be brought about without any serious attack on either the autonomy of the communes or the desires of the leaders of parochial education with respect

to the religious character of their schools. But it should increase the rights of the state.

In 1919 the Belgian Parliament enacted a law giving the same subsidies to private religious schools as to public schools, provided the former conformed with the minimum standards laid down by the state for the latter. The bill was supported by M. Destrée and most of the other Socialist members. Their action caused considerable criticism, it being charged, among other things, that M. Destrée had made concessions to the Catholics. In reply to this criticism M. Destrée insists that his general conception of equal subsidies for the private religious schools is the same conception that the Socialist councilors instinctively affirmed before the war when the establishment of school canteens was under consideration. In certain municipal councils the Liberals undertook to limit the advantages of the canteens to the public scholars. The Socialist councilors took a more generous position and insisted that the lunches should be given to the school children regardless of the religious beliefs of their parents. "Today we are doing for the sustenance of the brain what we formerly did for the sustenance of the body."

M. Destrée has always been classed as an anti-clerical. Has he given up his anti-clerical views? He has never been an ultra anti-clerical. He is still a conservative anti-clerical.

Understand me thoroughly. I am not abandoning anti-clericalism. I am simply abandoning its illiberal and sectarian aspects which, moreover, I have never supported. But I remain detached from every creed whatsoever, and am firmly determined to defend the liberty of the people without religious belief against the encroachments, always to be feared, of the religionists. In short, I propose to substitute for negative tactics, which are likely to create opposition, an actual constructive doctrine which is necessary for a government.

"What! Are you going to give public money to priests and nuns?" I am asked.

I reply, "Why not? I subsidize them not because they are priests and nuns but because they perform to my satisfaction a work specified by law and recognized as beneficial. That is sufficient; and, unless it is desired to give an exhibition of a deplorable Jacobinistic spirit, that is as much as can reasonably be demanded."

Other critics say that these people whom I endow with public funds are our enemies and that they will use against us the money with which you subsidize them.

I reply, "Set yourself at ease with respect to that. I do not consent to a subsidy except on condition that it is accompanied by control. Naturally the one does not take place without the other. From the time that private parochial education accepts money from the state it is not free from state control; it is subject to the elementary rule of probity that he who receives money for a definite purpose is not free to expend that money for anything he sees fit. He is required to show that the money has been expended for the prescribed purposes. From that point there may be differences of a legitimate character between the public and the parochial schools, since they are the result of liberty of education and are desired by the children's parents; but for the rest, both of them should conform to the law which assists them equally—both of them are educational institutions subsidized by the state and are to a certain extent public."

If the future should show that my attempt to realize school peace is vain through the fault of those who oppose it, if the parochial schools wish to remain parochial schools simply for the purpose of securing subsidies, but should refuse state control, then it would be necessary to return to the principles of rigorous secular public education, apply those principles more energetically than did the Liberals, and leave the Catholics merely the liberty to have their own schools at their own expense, risks, and perils.

Does the Socialist solution of the school question in Belgium offer the only hope for school peace? M. Destrée believes it does. Under the school laws of 1919 and 1920 the discretionary power of persecution and favoritism by the Minister of Education is considerably enlarged. "The anti-clericals will never consent to have this power given to a Catholic. On the other hand, and for similar reasons, a Liberal will be suspected by the Clericals, and even though he desired school peace he would also fall quickly under the suspicion of his friends." There remains but the solution offered by M. Destrée as the spokesman of the Socialist party:

In school matters a Socialist minister should develop and attempt to realize a solution different from the solutions brought forward by the old parties. Other ministers than I have undertaken to solve the school question; Georges Lorand and Leon Furnemont among others. But the time had not come.

Has the time come now? Has the catastrophe of the war with all its misfortunes brought us this benefit?

I cannot tell. So many dangerous germs are still fermenting, so many incomprehensions and so much ill will still occasionally appear that I sometimes doubt it.

But the time will come. And those who succeed me will achieve the work of national peace which the first Socialist Minister of Sciences and Arts outlined.