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THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Bernard C. Steiner

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THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

BERNARD C. STEINER*

Two institutions are found in the field of public education—the Public School and the Public Library. The Public Library is much the younger of these, and in its modern acceptation has not yet seen 75 years of history. Its growth has been marvelously rapid, and is so recent that there is danger of its being overlooked by those who survey the factors in the social progress of the state; yet the Public Library is so pervasive and far-reaching in its influence that one must not leave it out, when he considers those institutions whose influence is vital in affecting the lives of men and women.

A brief statement of the number of registered borrowers and the home circulation of books in some of our great cities, shows the actual achievement of Public Libraries; for example: the last reports of the Public Library in Brooklyn show 348,631 persons registered and 5,349,382 books circulated; in Chicago, a registration of 212,030 and a home circulation of 5,806,000 volumes; in Boston a registration of 104,325 and a home circulation of 2,050,230; in Cleveland, Ohio, a registration of 180,104 persons and a home circulation of 3,324,908 volumes; in Los Angeles a registration of 119,629 and a home circulation of 2,304,631. These figures show the actual achievement of the Public Library; and its potentialities are almost unbounded, when the state shall have recognized its importance as thoroughly as the importance of the public school has been recognized. The Public Library is the only institution established by the state for the education of all persons within its borders, who have learned to read. It supplements the work of the public school in the care of the scholars who are receiving a formal, graded education. It is a continuation school for all persons above school age, providing them with an informal, ungraded, individual education, suited to the need of each person. The service of the Public Library as an educational institution is available to every citizen, so long as he lives, but that is not all; the Public Library is provided by the state for the mental recreation of its citizens, as the public parks are provided for their healthful, physical exercise and pleasure. The refreshment of mind from the reading of interesting, well-written books, is available to all through the Public Library. Nor does this complete the tale of its functions in benefiting the citizen of the state. The Public Library is a place

* This paper, furnished by the Librarian of the Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore, should be read in connection with the first thirteen papers, on Community agencies, published in RELIGIOUS EDUCATION for February.

of inspiration of spirit; a place for the dissemination of noble ideals; a place for the stimulation of ambition and effort by the example of men in other days and in all lands, who have lived righteous lives and have achieved a good report through the things they have said and done. It is, then, of vital importance to the people that religious education should be furnished them through the Public Library, and that this education should be furnished them "reverently, advisedly, and in the fear of God."

It is important that this association shall know what libraries are doing, shall consider what they may do, and shall aid and advise them in rendering the greatest possible public service in religious education. Obviously this education cannot be denominational, and yet with equal obviousness, there should be found in the Public Library, the great books on the great religions of the world.

There should be found in the Public Library, books which shall give, among other subjects, the great arguments for Theism, and for natural religion the way in which a man can "look through nature up to nature's God." Books should be found, making comparison of various religions, showing the distinctive features of each; the great religious books of the world, especially the Bible, the greatest of all such books, together with their best exposition should be in the Public Library. Because of the fact that the public school must influence persons grouped into classes, its religious education is largely limited to those which are common to the varied faiths of the parents of the pupils. The library, instructing individuals separately, has no such limitations, but can give the best books prepared for the adherents of each of the denominations of Christendom, and of the Jews, to say nothing of the other religions possessing fewer members in our country. History is truly the "way of God in the world," and through history—both that written from the religious standpoint and also that otherwise written—the lesson can clearly be drawn that "righteousness exhalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." Biography, with its wonderful incentive to righteous life through the example of good men and women who have gone before, may be used in an important sense for religious education. So, too, from science, in which one may, as Kepler said, "read the laws of God after him," education may be gained for the religious part of one's nature. Poetry, which has never quite lost its divine connection—has its place in the library. All these are subjects in which books, wisely provided by the Public Library, lead toward the better religious education of those who are the beneficiaries of the state's provision of books.