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Religion in the Public Schools

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YOUNG Canada is religiously illiterate." Again and again we hear this statement made. Facts cited to support it are disconcerting—to say the least. Padres who conferred with men who enlisted in the Forces during the last war were alarmed at the general ignorance of the Bible. Three High School teachers in Toronto said that when they were dealing with John Milton's sonnet on his blindness and came to the phrase, "that one talent which is death to hide", not one student knew the parable from which that figure of the "talent" was drawn. A student on a Western mission field found the children so completely ignorant of the Bible that he turned aside from other duties to teach the Bible every week in the four public schools of the district he served. One lad said to him: "My Mummy wants us to know these things, but she don't know nuthin' about them herself."

It is easy to multiply such instances and still easier to draw sweeping conclusions from them. Many can give equally striking examples on the other side. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence of widespread ignorance of the foundations of our faith to compel serious consideration.

Christian Education in the churches was never as efficiently carried on as it is today. Through their Boards and committees on Christian Education the churches are working untiringly to reach and assist the local congregation. Abundant material is being provided for Sunday Schools. Thousands of devoted men and women give their best week by week to the religious instruction of our young people. The ministers of the churches support them and devote much of their own time and strength to teaching.

Yet we must recognise the limitations of the churches' activities in this field. The Church School has only one hour a week for its work, and only a fraction of this time for actual teaching. It is often difficult to find qualified teachers. The equipment for the classes is poor in many churches. Only a minority of the boys and girls in many places attend Sunday School. One minister taught a class of eighty in a public school on the border of one of our cities, but he could reach only ten of them through the Church. This may be exceptional, but we have too many such exceptions. It is clear that far more must be done to bring the truth of God to the young people of the land.

In most of the Provinces the public schools are open for religious instruction and in all the Provinces they are open for worship. The General Synod of the Anglican Church in Canada issued the following statement in 1946:

Religious Education consists of four major parts:

1. A simple Act of Worship (called by the Department of Education 'Religious Exercises') at the opening of the school, consisting of the Lord's Prayer, other prayers, Bible Reading (as a rule without comment), and a hymn.

2. Religious Instruction, a setting forth of the main story elements and general contents of the Old and New Testaments, with special emphasis on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

3. The use of other elements in the present programme of study which can be classified as religious, of which there is a considerable amount in all the Provinces.

4. An education permeated throughout with religion."

The first, third and fourth of these points are recognised in all the Provinces, but in some of them the second is left out.

Since the British North America Act of 1867 committed Education to the Provinces, we have different systems across Canada.

In Newfoundland the schools are staffed and operated by the main religious denominations, with provincial support. Here the churches have full opportunity to provide the worship and the religious teaching that their people need.

There is no provision for religious instruction in the schools of Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Owing to the increase of the French Canadian element in New Brunswick a new situation is arising, so that religion is likely to have a larger place in their schools in the future. In all three Provinces the schools may be opened with the reading of the Bible (without comment) and the repetition of the Lord's Prayer. There is no provision for separate schools in the Education Acts of these three Provinces, although in the larger centres of population certain schools have been set apart by agreement for Roman Catholics.

Religious worship and instruction are compulsory in the Protestant schools of Quebec. Students in their school for Teachers are given careful guidance both in the conduct of worship and in teaching the Bible. Whilst there are separate schools in Quebec as in Ontario, the schools of the French Canadian majority in Quebec are not public schools in quite the same sense as the word "public" is used in the other Provinces: they are rather Roman Catholic schools.

Classes in the public schools of Ontario are opened each day with religious exercises consisting of a Scripture reading and the repeating of the Lord's Prayer, or other prayers approved for the purpose. Two half-hours each week, in addition to the time for worship, are provided for religious teaching. The staff of the Teachers' Colleges are required to train their students in the conduct of worship and in methods of teaching the Bible. The different denominations are expected to provide instruction for the students belonging to their respective churches in the content of the Bible teaching which is to be given. This is important, because the Regulations require teachers in the public schools to give religious instruction, following the "Guides" approved for the first six grades by the Department of Education. If for any reason teachers wish to be relieved of this responsibility, the ministers of the local churches may be engaged to do it or to arrange for its being taught by persons whom they approve.

There are no separate schools in Manitoba or British Columbia, but they

do exist in Saskatchewan and Alberta. The three prairie Provinces authorise a half-hour each day for religious teaching during school hours, but no provision is made in the course of training at "Normal Schools" to prepare student-teachers to undertake this religious instruction. That is left to the churches. Schools in all three Provinces are to be opened with religious exercises. British Columbia, however, adds the rider that "otherwise the schools shall be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles."

Care is taken in all the Provinces to safeguard the rights of children whose parents object either to the opening religious exercises or to the instruction provided, so that they may absent themselves without penalty. One notices in all our departments of Education the fear of sectarian teaching with its divisive effects, and also the belief that the Bible can be so taught as to bring out those central truths of our faith that all Christians accept.

The ministers of Education in the various Provinces are in favour of giving a prominent place to religion in the schools, and to that end desire the co-operation of the churches. Among them there is a strong conviction that the inspiration of true religion is needed in our public education: first, to make the teaching of ethics effective in the lives of the pupils; and second, to move our young people to adopt and advocate high ideals of citizenship.

Here, then, is an unrivalled opportunity for the churches. Yet they have been slow to seize it. The churches as such seem to refuse responsibility for this work. It is one thing to have the teaching of religion in the public schools sponsored by inter-denominational agencies like ministerial associations. It is a totally different matter to have responsibility for it accepted by the churches as part of their programme of Christian Education, which they may work out together. Much excellent service is being rendered in all the Provinces by individual ministers co-operating through fraternal associations. But these groups are necessarily local in their range and cannot plan their activities on a province-wide scale. They have no authority. There is no one to whom the men teaching are accountable or who can give direction about the courses of study to be followed and supply the helps that are required. The only way in which all parts of the Provinces can be reached is by the churches assuming the work through their Boards of Christian Education, which operate through regular organisations—dioceses, presbyteries, conventions, or whatever their forms may be.

Now at last this is being done. Inter-church committees composed of men officially appointed by their respective denominations are being formed in the Provinces. They can act for their churches and have their decisions carried out by the churches. This provides for that joint action which is the first necessity. A single instance of the need for co-operation is to be seen in the fact that Ontario has authorised courses of Bible study for the first six grades and has had guidebooks prepared for the teachers and in the fact that the ministers of the churches have been asked to teach the students in the Teachers' Colleges. Yet the churches of Ontario have never

come together to arrange a course that will give unity to this work and prepare student-teachers to teach the subjects prescribed. Nor has there been any suggestion of the helps required for this particular task.

It is generally conceded that a Christian teacher, properly trained for this part of his work and in command of the discipline of the school, can give religious instruction more effectively than any one who comes into the school from outside. Under such a teacher religion is taught as an integral part of the curriculum, and, indeed, as the crown of all study. Where this is possible, the teacher is entitled to the minister's assistance in whatever way necessary and to the minister's support in the School Board and the community. Where it is found to be impossible or undesirable for the school teacher to do the work, the minister or ministers of the district can make an invaluable contribution to the moral and spiritual development of the pupils by teaching the prescribed religious courses.

One of the dangers at the present time is that, where the local clergy ignore the priceless opportunity offered by the Province, certain sects will take advantage to teach their own peculiar dogmas, with all their divisive influences. If such people obey the Regulations and use the courses authorised by the Department of Education, no objection can be taken; but the approval of the local ministers is required. It must be admitted, however, in view of some of the teaching given in the Teachers' Colleges, that the sects are not the only ones who teach sectarianism!

At a recent gathering of teachers the idea was stressed that the daily worship of the school offers the richest opportunity for cultivating a truly religious spirit. To teach by precept and example what worship really is, to explain every phrase of the Lord's Prayer and then lead in offering it reverently, to train young people to sing the National Anthem as a prayer, to insure their understanding of each passage of Scripture read, to inspire a love for some of the great hymns of the Church is to leave impressions on sensitive souls that time cannot efface.

One cannot study the Education Acts of the Provinces without feeling that the ideal of our legislators has been the training of the mind, culminating in the development of moral and spiritual character. To co-operate in the realisation of this ideal is the high and holy privilege offered to the Christian churches of our land.