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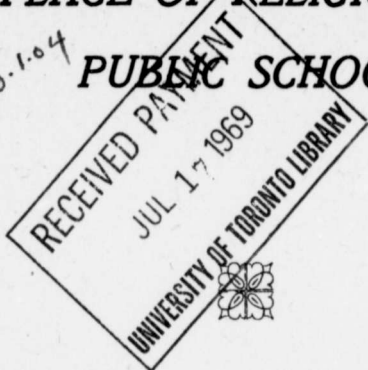
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THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL



By **JOHN MILLAR, B.A.**

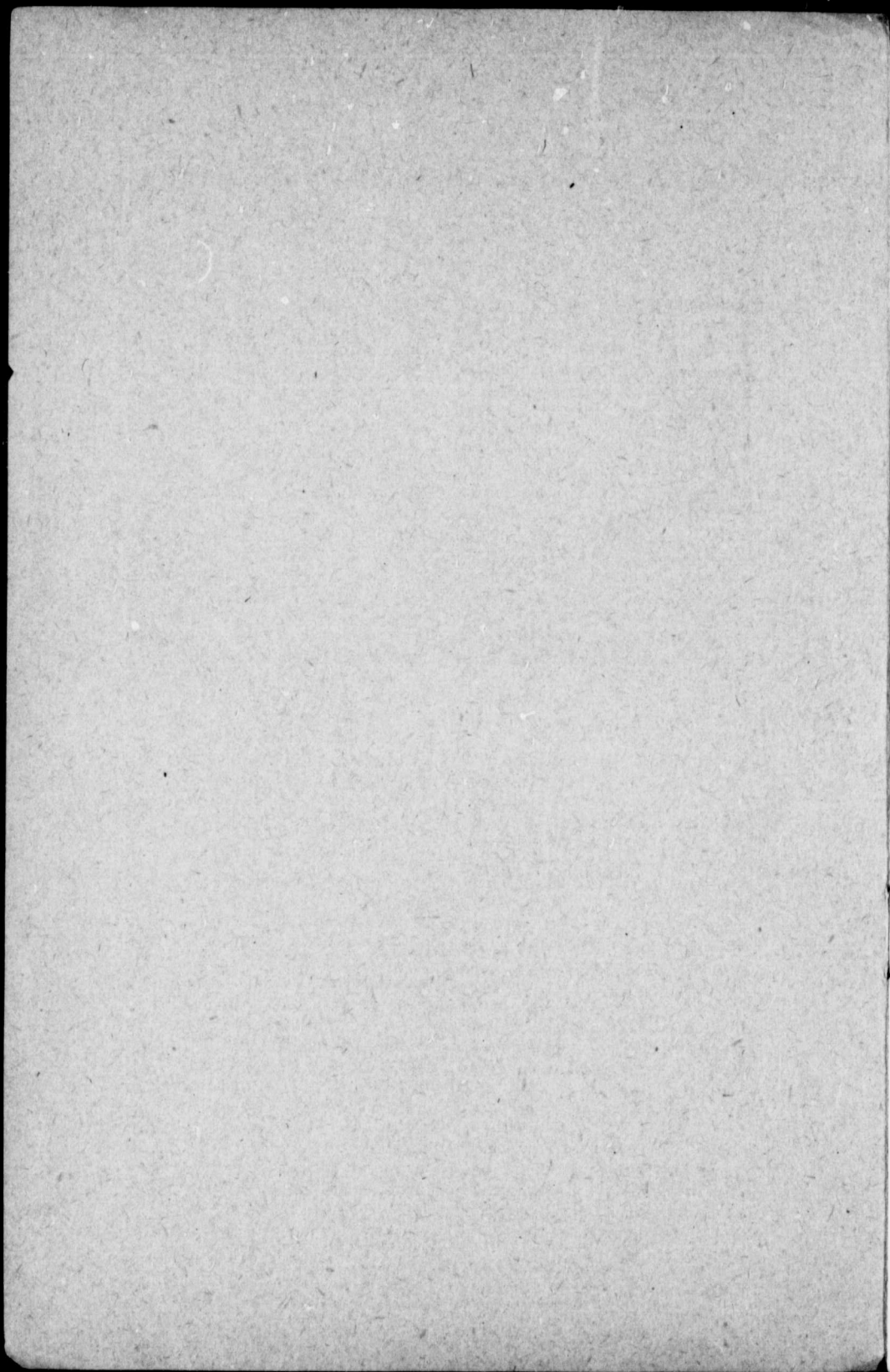
Deputy Minister of Education for the Province of Ontario.

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THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

BY JOHN MILLAR, B.A.,

Deputy Minister of Education for Ontario.



THE subject of this paper has often been discussed. The question of religion in the school has many acrimonious associations. More than once in this Province it has given rise to bitter feelings. Too often it has become an important issue in political contests. In England, the subject of religious education, in view of recent legislation, has put many parts of the country in a ferment, and even aroused the spirit of Hampden. In France the question brings up the name of Jules Ferry, and the strife that arose some thirty years ago as a consequence of his administration of educational affairs. In the United States, the experience of New York in the seventies, and Wisconsin of a later date, shows the difficulty of disposing of an important matter without arousing animosities. Germany is perhaps the only great nation that has made religion—Lutheran or Roman Catholic—a part of its school programme. The experience of Germany is not, however, very encouraging. It is not too much to infer that when the science of education is better understood, there may be less difficulty in considering the question on its merits. Several religious denominations in Ontario have more than once urged the propriety of adopting the Bible as a text-book in our schools. Their purposes are good, and their proposals should be carefully considered. A clear understanding regarding the function of the school is desirable.

There is a sense in which religion can have no place in the public school without presenting very serious practical difficulties. There is, however, a sense in which religion may be given a place that will meet with general approval. As religion is something that should be observed in all the actions of life, it is hard to see how it can be excluded from the school, any more than from the farm, the shop, the office, and the legislative halls. The problem, as often discussed, is whether religion may be taught in such a way as to meet with the approval of different denominations. The pedagogical problem, which should first be solved, is whether the teacher must give religious instruction in order to make moral training effective. Unfortunately, many persons ignore the pedagogical problem, and assume that the person who instructs in grammar, and in morals, must also instruct in religion. The science of education, so far as I have read the subject, does not sustain the position that the teacher must give instruction in religion in order to train children morally. I have also failed to find that the ablest teachers, whose practical knowledge should be valuable, hold a different view.

On the question of the place of religion in the school, conflicting views are held by the general public. A few persons contend that a position of neutrality respecting religion is the only safe one to be taken where there is a mixed population. A small number of this class would not only oppose religious instruction, but expect the teacher to adopt a neutral attitude

as to the value of religion. It is not too much to say, however, that a system of secular schools, which leaves the value of religion an open question, would meet with little favour. It will certainly not satisfy those who hold that religious motives are essential to moral training. The mere abolition of religious exercises does not prevent, and cannot prevent, the reference to religion that comes up in giving effective instruction in literature, in history, and in science. To exclude religion from the school is impossible. A neutral attitude on the value of religion is practically out of the question. The so-called neutral position would be a surrender and capitulation to an element in society certainly not the most praiseworthy.

There is a second class of persons who go towards the other extreme. They believe that morality cannot be taught effectively unless lessons in religion are given by the teacher. Some go so far as to urge that instruction in the Bible, in the catechism, or in the common dogmas of all the Churches, should have a place in the programme. Opinions of this kind give rise to separate or parochial schools, as well as denominational colleges. Unanimity on the question of religious instruction is not essential to national greatness, or to educational progress. Much may be said in favour of some variety, rather than uniformity, in social, political, and educational agencies. Persons who favour private schools, as well as those who believe in separate or denominational schools, should have some freedom respecting courses of study and management of these institutions. My arguments are for those who favour undenominational education.

The Public Schools of Ontario have been established with the understanding that they will meet

the requirements of the various religious denominations. Those who believe in the principles upon which they are conducted, generally hold that moral training in school requires religious sanctions, but not religious instruction. This view not only prevails in this country and in the United States, but it is steadily gaining ground in England. The growth of a spirit of union and tolerance has lessened the demand for dogmatic instruction in religion, while it has not lessened the importance that should be attached to Christianity. No denomination can claim exclusive possession of those principles that are essential to morality. Good citizens are found among both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Neither moral worth nor material prosperity is dependent on a belief in the special tenets of any one sect. Religious instruction, even when given in the schools, is no guarantee that young people will grow up free from sin and crime. Children have turned out bad through defective discipline that had every advantage from religious instruction in their homes, in the Church, and in the school. Apart from the question by whom religious instruction should be given, it can never make up for defects in the other factors that are essential to the development of character.

Intelligent people are fairly well agreed as to the leading principles of Christianity upon which morality is based. Every civilized nation has assumed in its legal enactments, and in its administration of justice, the omnipotence of God. The civil oath exacted in our courts shows the character of the national will. It recognizes that religion is a quickener of the individual conscience, and that the belief in moral responsibility is firmly established in the human heart. On these grounds, the use of religion, but not neces-

sarily religious instruction, has its place in every well-conducted public school. It is the duty of the teacher to employ, for purposes of discipline, those motives and incentives which human nature possesses as its divine attributes. The State admits religion to be the essential basis of morality, but this admission does not foster the special views of any sect. For the purposes of the school, the value of religion may be assumed, without an examination of its principles. A prominent educationalist, the late Dr. White, says, "You might as well say that we shall not use the sunlight, unless we teach the chemistry of it; that we shall not breathe the air unless we analyze it in the schools, as to say that you cannot use religious sanctions unless you use the dogmatic definitions of religion."

The aim of the school is to train children to become good citizens. The advocates of religious instruction often say that the parent has an inalienable right to decide how his child shall be educated. Doubtless he has certain rights, as well as duties, regarding the religious, moral, intellectual, and physical training of his children. If the State decides to confine its efforts to what will assist the parent to train his children morally and intellectually, their religious wants must still receive the attention of the parent. His religious obligation is not removed if the State in its wisdom should regard religion as a matter that should be left to the parent or the Church. The aim of the Public School is to develop character, and religion is simply an instrument to be used for the purpose only so far as necessary. If religion were to be added to the subjects of the Public School curriculum, it is evident from its transcending importance it should receive greater recognition on the time-table than any other subject. Just as soon as

the necessity of religious instruction in creeds or dogmas is admitted, the establishment of denominational schools, instead of national schools, is the logical outcome.

I believe it will be acknowledged that morality is not confined to the teaching of any one religious body, and that those who do wrong have not lived up to the doctrines of their Church. There are certain leading principles held by all denominations. The belief in a personal God, the dependence of man on his Maker, the immortality of the soul, and the accountability of every intelligent person to the Supreme Being, are recognized principles of every good kind of ethical teaching. Reverence for authority is a necessary condition of obedience to law, and this implies a reverence for and a belief in the Source of all law. Every good disciplinarian is required to assume all the essential principles of Christianity. I have never known a teacher who felt that his power in character-building was weak because he was prohibited from giving instruction in religion; indeed, the teacher in a good Church School promotes moral training exactly in the same way as the teacher in a good Public School. Will any one contend that the moral character of pupils taught in sectarian schools is superior to that of those trained in our Public Schools? The population that reaches this continent from Europe, where education is denominational, does not show more obedience to law than the people trained in our national schools. I have been told by English educationalists that the moral tone of boys in Canada is, on the average, better than in the Old Country.

After all, the efficiency of national schools, when properly supported, is the crowning evidence of the soundness of the principles upon which they have been estab-

lished. They have done much to throw down sectarian barriers; to efface unreal distinctions; to promote true democracy, and to unite in a great brotherhood children of various nationalities and creeds. As the late Colonel Parker said:

"Home is the centre; the Church makes home better; but the common school is the place where the lessons gained in both may be essentially practised. Here classes learn to respect each other; children of the rich and the poor, the intelligent and the ignorant, are fused and blended by mutual action and mutual love. The common schools present a perfect means of moral training—order, work, and play—all tending to the cultivation of true manhood."

I am assuming that religion is the basis of morality, and that religious influences have in some way or other contributed to the moral status of every well-conducted person. I am also assuming that any attempt to base moral obligation on human authority alone weakens the conscience and enfeebles the will. With these assumptions, the teacher has a strong starting-point. The children that come to our Public Schools ordinarily have received in their homes, and in the Church, some preliminary training in religious beliefs. Generally, they will continue to receive instruction from the same sources. The teacher has, therefore, the essential incentives at hand for the highest type of moral training. The school cannot be called "godless," where the teacher's duties from a pedagogical point of view are faithfully performed. The Bible may be used in the school for moral ends, although not used in the technical sense of the term. If a teacher is well qualified, he will be acquainted with the Bible as the best work on ethics. He is concerned, however, not with theories, but with practical ethics. It is not necessary for him to discuss the ultimate basis of moral distinctions, in order to teach his pupils to be

obedient to their parents, to be honest and truthful, and to abstain from every kind of wrong-doing.

Religious sanctions are, however, sufficiently imperative for a teacher's purposes. Apart from the practical difficulties in the way of giving, through the teacher, religious instruction in the Public Schools, I hold that sound principles of teaching would condemn the methods of this kind which are frequently proposed. The fact is too often overlooked, that the question in dispute is one that should be discussed in the field of pedagogy, and not in that of theology or politics. Better moral training is certainly demanded in our schools. This object can be secured, not by more religious exercises, but by better teaching. Greater skill in taking up the branches already found in the curriculum will accomplish a great deal. If we have better qualified teachers, better discipline will be secured. The best teacher is the one who is the best disciplinarian. The good teacher does not need to give instruction in the common doctrines of religion, but to use religious sanctions as school incentives whenever they are warranted by the demands of sound discipline; indeed, a good teacher rarely brings to his aid the highest class of incentives. The parent does not find it prudent to use ordinary motives of a religious character in order to induce his children to do right. There is danger in associating religious influences too closely with the routine work of the school, or of the home.

"In view of these differences between religious instruction and secular instruction, and in view of the contrast between the spirit of the school and the spirit of the Church, it is clear that the school cannot successfully undertake religious instruction; in fact, experience goes to show that the school fails to achieve success when entrusted with religious instruction, and it is certain that the

Church becomes less efficient when it abates in any way the impressiveness of its ceremonial in its art and music and in its use of the language of the Bible in its ritual."—*Dr. W. T. Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education.*

Good discipline in a school promotes morality. A pupil generally learns morality as an art, and not as a science. Doing right may become a habit. The function of school government is training pupils in habits of self-control. Self-control implies self-denial and resistance to temptation. Habits of regularity, punctuality, accuracy, courtesy and other valuable features of character are promoted by good discipline. Moral training should be mainly incidental. Ethical truths expressed in a didactic form often fail to bind the conscience of the child. A set period for moral lessons is not found in the time-table of a good teacher. Morality is no more to be taught by rote, or by means of a book, than football or swimming. Doing good is the only way to become good. A good disciplinarian will see that all the arrangements of the school make it easy for the pupils to do right. A moral, or Christian teacher or parent, if deficient in powers of discipline, will make a poor teacher of morals. A good example is not enough. The bad teacher of the subjects of the curriculum, even though a good man, is a poor teacher of morality. To train a child to act and speak rightly, he must be trained to think rightly. This implies the necessary power to be possessed by the teacher. That country is doing most to promote moral training in its schools which is doing most to provide well-trained teachers.

Unjust charges are often made against the Public School. The imputation that the school is greatly at fault is too serious to be passed over. The frequency with which

crimes are committed by persons who pass through our schools is mentioned as proof that knowledge is not the blessing it has been claimed to be. It is contended that the Public Schools turn loose upon society thousands whom they have helped to make sharp rogues. Now, it should be understood that the science of education has to do with all knowledge, and that it is yet very imperfectly understood. The average ratepayer regards himself, however, as fully competent to settle the most difficult educational problems. For every evil that afflicts the community, some persons are ready with a remedy. Too often the imperfections of the school are regarded as the only source of prevailing troubles. It is a fact that no human agency is more beset by advocates of plausible nostrums than the Public Schools.

It should be at once asserted that it is very unfair to make the school a scapegoat for all the evils that are rampant in society. The school is not the only agency for promoting morality. The teacher cannot visit the homes of his pupils and counteract the bad training of those who have reached positions of parental authority without realizing its responsibility. It is not easy for him to implant principles of obedience, truthfulness, honesty, courtesy, and self-control in the minds of children who from their infancy have been furnished with examples of an opposite kind. It is too much to expect during the short time which the average child remains in school that the teacher's influence will overcome the bad associations of the streets, the vile language so often heard, the degrading effects of the saloon, and the hundred other evils that pollute society in all large cities. It is unreasonable to expect teachers to be able to stamp out evils which society itself tolerates. It is safe to say

that in spite of the alleged defects of the school, every parent who has not relegated his own duties to the Church, or to some other agency, finds the well-qualified school-teacher his most effective support.

The need of ethical training must be admitted. Morality is essential to the welfare of the State. The numerous opportunities presented to persons of sharp intelligence for the sudden acquisition of wealth, the facilities for gaining political power, and the temptations to which young men of mere shrewdness are exposed, show that if moral education is ignored in our schools, ruin will come to the State in spite of our much-valued civilization. The rapidity with which intelligent power has supplanted physical force has given the man of brains extraordinary influence among his fellows. The outlook is in many respects alarming. Every day brings its disclosures of untruthfulness, dishonesty, and corruption. Intemperance and profanity are prevalent. Defaulters and gamblers exist. Scandals in public life are not unknown. It is idle in the face of crimes brought to the public gaze by the press and the courts to deny the urgent need of training in morality. Ethical training should be given by the school, as well as by the home and the Church. Each has its duty in the matter. What, then, should be done to remedy existing conditions? Some one may ask what suggestions do I offer?

1. Better teachers. The qualifications at present exacted are not sufficient. The academic attainments should be raised. The professional course should be lengthened. A stiffer course in pedagogy should be exacted. Works in ethics should be prescribed for the Normal Schools and the Normal Colleges. Moral science should receive fully as much attention as psychology. It will be neces-

sary, however, to expend more money if better moral results are to be obtained. The salaries of Public School teachers have in many places almost reached the starving point. Much higher remuneration for teachers is necessary. The legislative grant, and perhaps the municipal grants in townships, should no longer be apportioned on mere average attendance. The qualifications of the teachers and the expenditure made by trustees should become factors in determining the apportionments to be received. The expenditure for education should be doubled.

2. The personality of the teacher should be valued more by trustees. His university standing or his success in the passing of pupils at examinations should be deemed of minor importance, when compared with character. His influence for good outside the school should receive attention. His ability as a character-builder should be valued more than his facility in giving instruction. Parents should be more desirous of having the ethical side of their children strengthened than their intellect developed. Knowledge should not be regarded as synonymous with education. The parent should cooperate more readily with the teachers in their arduous task. A parent should get acquainted with the teacher, and regard him as a co-worker in the training of his children. The parent should be taught to feel that the moral training of his children is his own duty, rather than that of the school or the Church. Fortunate is that child whose parents and teachers are working harmoniously and intelligently for his good.

3. Children should receive more religious instruction. This religious instruction cannot always be given intelligently by the parent. The Church should make better

provision to supply the neglect of parental religious training. I do not think much can be said in favour of having systematic religious instruction given in the schools after school hours, or even by closing the schools some school day during the week. France adopted the plan of closing the schools on Thursdays for purposes of religious instruction. The result is that little, if any, religious instruction is given in many places to the children on Sunday. The importance of the Sabbath day should be heightened. The most valuable religious instruction will doubtless be given in the

Sunday-school; but the time is too short. Why not have the sermons in our churches in the mornings on Sunday mainly for the children? Parents would then be encouraged to bring their children to church. There is too little expended by churches for the youth. Why should not the greatest efforts be employed in behalf of the children? I have reason to believe that this view of the question is taken by many clergymen at the present day. He is a poor parent that would not rather pay for religious instruction for his children than for himself.