Jewish Resistance to Christianity in the Ontario Public Education System

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Promotion of Christianity in the secular public education system of Ontario has been a central feature in cultural production of the dominant culture.[1] Thus, non-sectarian Christian studies became standard in the informal and formal curriculum and compulsory for non-Christian students after 1878 and until 1990 (*Religious information and moral development* [hereafter, Mackay Report], 1969; *Corporation of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association et al. and Minister of Education et al.*, 1990). The opposition and resistance to this "regime" deserve careful historical study since we might thus better understand both reproduction and dominance. Giroux (1983) points out that "the mechanisms of reproduction are never complete and are always faced with partially realized elements of opposition" (p. 283). This, I argue, points to a form of historical research which has not yet been sufficiently applied to the case of Ontario Jews.

RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION BEFORE 1944

In Upper Canada, formal education was largely the responsibility of churches, and in the transfer of education from the Church to the common schools after the 1830s, the question of religious instruction arose (Phillips, 1961; Wilson, Stamp, & Audet, 1970). Although religious instruction was not officially given in the public day school until 1944, "it is possible to say with some truth that religious instruction has always been present in the public schools of Ontario" (Mackay Report, 1969, p. 3). The Jews first settled in Toronto in the mid-19th century when the Reverend Egerton Ryerson was superintendent of education for Upper Canada and he "relied on the teacher to do the religious instruction" (Zondag, 1990, p. 31). That is, he relied on the curriculum of civic and moral education prescribed in the programs of the Department of Education to provide the necessary vehicle for Christian indoctrination.

During the 1880s, regulations were enacted requiring that "all common schools have opening and closing exercises consisting of the Lord's Prayer and reading from the Scriptures" (Prentice, 1977, pp. 128–129). In 1897, a deputation of the Anglican Church asked the Toronto Public School Board to move religious instruction from after-school to in-school time. The Anglicans were mainly concerned about the "deficiencies" of children in the Jewish Ward (Kurelek & Arnold, 1976, p. 60). This request was vigorously protested by deputations of Toronto Jews from the Holy Blossom Congregation (Canadian

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Jewish Congress, 1967). The Jewish protest, with the support of other elements in the city's population bore fruit, and the Board rejected the Anglican requests (Canadian Jewish Congress, 1967, pp. 8–11). However, the ethos of the public schools remained Christian-Protestant (Lanning, 1985).

1944: COMPULSORY RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

The status of religious instruction in the common schools changed during the Second World War when numerous schools introduced more systematic religious instruction than that presented during the Ryèrsonian and, later, the interwar periods. From 1944/45 onward, non-Christian yet essentially Christian religious instruction was formal policy in districts choosing to give such instruction. The instruction was taught during regular class time by the teachers, and in some cases by clergy or lay people in lieu of teachers (*Corporation of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association et al. and Minister of Education et al.,* 1990, p. 341). The most vigorous attack on this policy came from Jewish community leaders. On 19 September 1945 the Canadian Jewish Congress submitted a brief to the Royal Commission on Education in Ontario (the Hope Commission). In it the separation of Church and State was praised, and the textbooks used for religious instruction and religious education were criticized.

Opposition to courses of religious instruction gained momentum in the 1960s, in line with the culturally liberal ideas of the time. Jewish parents were active and instrumental in mobilizing opposition, often operating outside the religious and community organizations, usually central to such operations (Canadian Jewish Congress, 1967, Appendix E).[2] The Ministry of Education decided to study the issue of religious instruction, and a special committee began work (Mackay Report, 1969). The Canadian Jewish Congress (1967) submitted an energetic brief once again, and that brief was partly successful in halting Christian indoctrinatory practices. The Mackay Report (1969) recommended a halt to religious education in the elementary schools of Ontario, but retention of the Lord's Prayer or some other prayer.

In Metro Toronto, the city Board most vociferously opposed to the policy was North York, for "in no other Board in Metro is there such a high proportion of Jews and other non-Christians in the schools" ("Religion in our schools," 1973, p. 23). The Ministry partly acquiesced and Section 28(4) in the Regulation 704/78 of the Education Act for elementary schools in 1978 decreased the number of hours devoted to formal religious education, but "regulation requires two periods of religious education in public schools each week" (*Corporation of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association et al. vs. Minister of Education et al.,* 1988, p. 577) during regular class time. At the

secondary school level, religious instruction was left to the discretion of the school boards and the principals (Section 29).

THE CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom (1982) became an important tool for protest and social change precisely in respect of the question of religious domination and indoctrination. In April 1986, Christian religious exercises (the offering of the Lord's Prayer) in the public schools in Ontario were challenged in the Ontario Divisional Court by five families from Sudbury (four parents from these families were Jews) and by the Canadian Jewish Congress ("Children don't have to pray," 1986, p. A17). That challenge failed, as did a similar action in 1988 brought before the Divisional Court (*Corporation of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association et al. vs. Minister of Education et al.,* 1988). These decisions were eventually overruled by two verdicts of the Ontario Court of Appeal (*Zylberberg et al. and the Director of Education of Sudbury Board of Education,* 1989; *Corporation of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association et al. and Minister of Education et al.,* 1990). The Ministry of Education then (after the submission of the Watson Report; Watson, 1990), thus, published an interim policy preventing any religious studies, as "there is no public consensus on the role of education about religion in the public elementary school curriculum, nor is there widespread experience in Ontario with this subject" (cited in Remus, James, & Fraikin, 1992, p. 252).

In the few cases in which religious instruction and education have been publicly protested, Jews have been involved ("No religion can claim classroom," 1984; "Religion in our schools," 1973). The main themes of these protests are separation between Church and State; the multicultural, multireligious nature of Canadian identity (Shamai, 1987, 1988); and the social and self-image of non-Christian students.

Ontario arrangements for religious instruction in public schools influenced legal decisions in British Columbia (*Russow and Lambert v. Attorney General of British Columbia,* 1989), and in Manitoba (*Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties Inc. et al. v. Government of Manitoba et al.,* 1992).

This research note outlines a hypothesis that may be the guideline for a larger study based on primary documentation.

NOTES

[1] See for example: Aoki, 1981; Corrigan & Curtis, 1985; Curtis, 1983, 1988, 1992; Lanning, 1985; Prentice, 1977; Shamai, 1987.

[2] This parent-voluntarism was probably the outcome not just of the *revolutionary* movement (1988–1970), but also of ancient organized forces at work in a loosely

aggregated Jewish *community*. We need further demographic, political, and economic studies of these activist Jewish parents, to explore their sociological profile.

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