

Sunday School Revisited: An alternative to Christian Education of the Church today?

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Abstract. What called the Sunday School movement in England in the 18th century? What was Sunday school for? In searching for the spirit of Sunday school from its origin, the Sunday school movement in England, the paper poses the questions, "Is Sunday school still an alternative to Christian Education of the Church today, which is situated in the era of "super-high-tech" and globalization, specifically within a society defined by the transnational migrant world in pursuit of a better opportunity? If the Sunday school is the answer of the church to the transnational migrant world today, then what models of Sunday school could be suggested? Who would be necessary learners in this society?" The article tries to answer these questions particularly in Canadian setting.

I. Beginning

One hundred years ago, a well-known religious educator in North America, George Albert Coe critically viewed educational ministry of his time stating it "no place in the churches and stood at the doors of the churches knocking." (Coe 1933) Coe went on to challenge the churches' stance on religious education, its "walled-in" religious education. He also pointed out:

The biggest problem of the separation of church from society was bringing the youth to Christ. While the churches were pursuing the priestly function in the churches, the schools and the society were giving the students and the young people ultimate value to promote a secularistic life aparted from Christian understanding and vocation. Therefore, the young were presently being formed more by the secular culture than by the church and its "walled-in" religious education. (Coe 1928)

Just as Coe concerned about the separation between the church as well as the school and the society, the youth and adults alike became secularized, and left the church. As a result we see that the vast majority of churches in North America are now empty.

By considering both what George Albert Coe predicted and what has happened in today's church, I would like to revisit a particular time of Christian education in religious education history. It is called the Sunday

School movement in the late 18th century. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus exclusively on Sunday School initiated by Robert Raikes.

II. Sunday School Movement in the late 18th century

In fact, Sunday schools preceded the Sunday School movement in the late 18th century. As early as in the 16th Century St. Charles Borromeo organized Sunday School for the needy, specifically for the purpose of teaching and catechizing of children in his own district of Milan. There were a few other cases in church history, such as those established by the Rev. Joseph Alleine, a Yorkshire clergyman with the help of his wife, Miss Hannah Ball, John Wesley, and Mrs. Catherine Boevey. However, we still recognize Robert Raikes as the real pioneer of Sunday School, the one who launched the nationwide Sunday School movement. This movement eventually spread to the whole world, resulting in a significant social change.

1. Call for the Sunday School

What called forth the Sunday School in the late 18th century? All agree that the social conditions of England in the 18th century called for the Sunday school movement. The establishment of Sunday schools was a response to the intellectual, moral, and religious conditions in England during the 18th century.

In the 18th century England, the industrial revolution was initiated, which required mass human labour in urban areas. Therefore, people in rural areas left their agrarian heritage and migrated to the newly established mills and factories hiring in the large cities, hoping better quality of life. There were many open jobs due to the ever growing demand for factory-products. The population was growing exponentially in the new centres of industrial expansion with consequent social trauma. In particular the harsh reality of urban life crushed the dream of a kind of life families had initially hoped for. Working conditions were harsh. Parents had to work hard for long hours between twelve and fifteen hours a day. Children seemed to be everywhere without any form of parental supervision. Pay was very poor. The housing conditions were cramped, unsanitary, and divided into inadequate quarters. Despite such poor living conditions, the cost of rent was very high. (Hayes, p.22) And as such was the case for the urban poor, in order to survive every pair of hands in the households often had to turn to employment. (McQuaid,

pp.16–17) Parents of the poorer class wanted their children to earn money in the difficult days of social upheaval and economic change by sending them off to the factories and mills. Also, the factories hired adult men, then adult women, then children over seven years of age for cheaper labour. This often resulted in men without employment, which resulted in their turning to crime for bread.

The child labour laws were yet to be developed. Factories and Mills hired children for low wages, and put them to work for eight to ten hours each day, six days a week. Children who laboured in factories during weekdays and were released for Sundays behaved badly on Sundays, spending their time in noise and riot, playing at chuck, cursing and swearing in the streets. Young children who could not work were left home without care, entertaining themselves in the street. There was no parental model for children at home. Hayes wrote “the neglected children of the poor were a nuisance to each other and an intolerable burden to grown-up people.....the youngest children had little to learn of vice and wickedness, while their language seemed to be more or less confined to swearing and profanity.” (Hayes, p.22) Farmers and other inhabitants complained of more injury from the lawless children to their property on the Sabbath than rest of the week, since the children were allowed to run wild on that day, free from all restraints.

In the 18th century England, there was no middle class, but only the upper and the lower class masses. The former hated the latter, treated them as inferior beings, and regarded them as “one of the necessary evils of the time.” (Hayes, p.22) Illiteracy was common. It was difficult to find a poor man who could read. Ignorance and vice abounded among the lower classes in cities and towns.(Robert, 1834, p.13) Ill practices such as drinking and gaming were prevalent. People suffered from lotteries, highwaymen, and robberies, yet there were little to no counteragents to overcome such ignorance and immorality.

The church as a religious institution was no different from society, as it did not welcome the masses. Hayes says, “The clergy and religious people of his day deliberately shunned the vulgar, as they called the masses, and were cordially disliked and avoided by the people in consequence.” (Hayes, p. 46) Therefore, Sunday for the masses was a day of rioting and drunkenness, or blood-sports such as cock-fighting and bull-baiting. As Raikes began to bring ragged urchins (ragamuffins) to the church, the

respectable congregation gaped with astonishment and dismay. Raikes was regarded as “mad.” (Hayes, p.46)

The better classes attended Cathedrals and the churches, but Wilbur says, “Christianity was dying of respectability on the one hand and confronted by a seething mass of ignorance and nameless vices on the other.” (Wilbur, p.13) The church which had almost entirely lost the traditional means of religious socialization neglected the masses who, in turn, retaliated by neglecting the Church. Hence, the religious life of this period was also very limited.

There was no school for the majority of the migrants, nor was there any opportunity for them to go to church, or for the proper catechizing of the children. Another factor that contributed to the lack of a cohesive moral code was the prevailing pew rent system of financing the churches. There was spiritual exhaustion, frustration and loss of faith for many. (Cliff, P. 15) With absent clergy and non-reading parents, the duty of teaching and hearing the catechism had almost lapsed at this time. The Bible was a neglected book.

With rapid population growth there was socialization ‘anomie, normlessness. According to Cliff, “It was a life with no clear goals, few models, or ‘significant others’ ... In the changing world of increasing families, moving families, changing expectations of society, parents could not be what Elkin calls ‘significant others’ because they did not themselves know how to behave.” (Cliff, p.15)

As a direct result of urbanization and industrial revolution, there were severe changes not only in family, but also in the church and society as a whole. With mass migration to cities, there was trauma in the entire society. The Sunday School movement was indeed a response to the call from the traumatized society of the time.

2. The Spirit of Sunday School

Sunday school rose out of compassion for the poorest of the poor. One incident in St. Catharine’s Meadow moved Robert Raikes to compassion: He was not able to have a conversation with a woman he was visiting because of an outburst of quarrelling, yelling, and swearing from a group of

wretched-looking children in rags.(Hayes, p.24) The woman explained how worse it was on Sundays, with multitudes of little wretches, released from the work in the factories. Raikes said, "It's a pity that something can't be done with these children." (Hayes, p.24) He determined to find some way of remedying this evil. The idea came to him that if he could gather some of these children into a school on Sundays, it would put the day to a good use, and also give the experiment the best chance of success, since the children over seven would be free of factory attendance. (Hayes p.25) What confirmed him in his purpose was meeting the clergyman of a neighbouring parish, the Rev. Thomas Stock who was interested in Raikes' proposal and promised to help him. (Hayes, p.26)

Raikes found a teacher, Mrs. Meredith and the first Sunday School was opened in her kitchen, in Sooty Alley, in Littleworth, one of the worst slum-districts of the city. He brought as many ragged urchins he could convince to attend. (Hayes, p. 26) Later he opened a Sunday School in Southgate street. Hayes describes, "scholars were 'a rough lot' and 'terrible bad,' with never an hour of schooling or the slightest touch of discipline." (Hayes p. 29)

Gradually a handful of boys began to come regularly and show an interest in the school. Raikes recruited his first scholars from the lowest of the low. Children of any age were accepted. (Hayes p. 33) Cliff comments that the Sunday school received the poorest of the poor and most neglected. The schools were for those whose parents could not afford to send them to any other school. (Cliff, p. 44) They were for the 'very poor', 'deserving poor', who were to be taught to read.

The Sunday School began at ten o'clock on Sunday mornings, and usually continued until one. The students reassembled in the afternoon, and at four o'clock walked across to St. Mary de Crypt church for a service, where they were sometimes catechised by the minister. They then returned to school for more instruction, which went on until five-thirty. (Hayes p.40-1) The first lesson was in personal cleanliness. "Clean hands, clean face, and tidy hair, are better than fine clothes to wear." (Hayes p. 33) They learned to read the Bible (usually Psalms and the Gospels), parts of the Church catechism, and some of Dr. Watts's hymns. The readings were highly moralistic taken directly from the Scripture. They attended the Public Worship on Sundays twice, "In the morning and in the afternoon to be introduced to the Nature of their Duty and inculcating the Principles of their

Religion, exhibiting the beauties of Scripture and selecting Moral Sentences for their Thought till the Evening of the Day.” In *Aris’s Gazette*, June 21st, 1784. (Cliff, p 33–34)

For Raikes taking those children to the church was a challenge. The respected congregation did not like to see those masses of children coming to the church. The boys were entirely overawed by their surroundings and were complete strangers to worship– they had not a clue when to stand, sit down, or kneel. It took time to drill them to a proper observation of the outward ceremonies of religion. (Hayes p.48)

The purpose of Sunday school was clearly ‘religious education,’ combining ‘religion’ and ‘education’ with two fold purposes: one to teach, the other to nurture in Christian religion. Therefore, in all forms of schooling the teaching of the catechism was a “must.” As Cliff says, there was no reform without religion. They believed that Sound child training was fundamentally associated with sound religious training. (Cliff, p. 57) Education was not separated from religious parts of teaching and modelling. Raikes reported in the *Gloucester Journal*, “Religion must wait on improved education among the masses before we shall be able to make much advance; but religion and education may go together.” (Hayes p.121)

I would claim that the Sunday school was organized from a philanthropic, Christian religious spirit. It was in the spirit of thinking about the future generations, future society and future individual beings. It was education for social reform, civilizing, domesticating, improving and uplifting the masses, the lower poor classes, just as Raikes claimed, “My little efforts to civilize the long–despised and neglected children of indigence.” (Cliff, p. 38) It was religious socialization and can be called ‘enculturation.’ The church at that time served as an instrument for this education. The purpose of Sunday school was not to promote the church growth, but by serving as an instrument, church membership grew as a by–product.

It was the spirit of thinking about, caring for and loving individual, neglected poor children, especially those who migrated from rural to urban areas. It was education for levelling up those children. It was education for those children in the knowledge of God. (Wilbur, p.3) It was education for morality by teaching Scriptures concerning morality. It was education for teaching religious practice. Education and religion were not separated, but worked as one.

3. The Fruits of Sunday School

After not too long, as the number of Sunday Schools increased in Gloucester, there were good signs from the effect of Sunday School. First of all, there was less noise and riot, and a greater sense of Sabbath peace and tranquillity abroad. The improvement in the general situation was greater than might be imagined. (Hayes, p. 48–9) Sunday School was approved as a reliable instrument for educating and Christianizing the masses. Those misbehaving children had learnt to read, were taught the Catechism and conducted to church. The conduct of the children was greatly civilized. The cursing and swearing and other vile expressions were rarely heard among them. (Hayes, p.63) They were very clean, and walked orderly to the church. Their behaviour during the service was perfectly silent. They all joined in the repetition of the Lord's prayer.

Through the Sunday School many of them were trained to do the socially preferred clerical work for which the new era brought an increasing demand. (Cliff, p.90) Many of them later became the teachers of Sunday School.

Through the Sunday school a community life emerged, as Cliff wrote, "The life of the schools provided the catalyst for the development of a respectable working class. In its way, it also provided the initial religious socialization for the renewal and invigoration of the churches, with a lag of perhaps ten years or so after the initial life and work in the schools." (Cliff, p. 126)

Through this movement the church grew in membership and became vigorous and effective. Hayes wrote of its outcome to the church,

In a hundred years the Sunday school had become an integral part of the religious life of all Protestant countries, and the greatest instrument for the Christianizing of the world in existence……claimed that the starting of Sunday schools saved the Church from extinction. For by providing a sphere of Christian service fro the laity, and contributing 90 per cent of its members, the Sunday school made the Church vigorous and effective. (Hayes, p. 113 .

However, there were differences in educational objectives between educators and savers. There were people and churches who wanted to

focus only on religious matters and others who wanted to focus more on general teaching matters, as Laqueur remarks differences between Church and Dissent. The biggest difference was that the savers were against Sunday writing and the educators were not. (Cliff, p.43) Therefore, some schools were more consciously “educational” and others more specifically “religious”.

Also, as time passed, there were more needs for a religious part of Sunday School. Raikes found that the time spent with the children on Sundays was not enough for religious subjects. He therefore approached the parents for their help, and opened the schools at certain times during the dinner hour and after the factories had closed in the early evening, for these. (Hayes p. 74) As Wilbur confirms, out of the Sunday School eventually grew a plan for national popular education. (Wilbur, p. 16) Sunday Schools on Sundays remained as parochial schools to be an instrument for nurturing faith for members of the parish, while the other part of teaching education moved to national popular education on week days. Even though today we still use the name of Sunday School at the church, it is completely different from that of its origin, and as confirmed by Cliff ‘Sunday School’ is a much abused phrase. It is a school for faith only, or for “believing only.” My question is: Do we need to retain Sunday school in its present form, changing the name only from Sunday school to ‘church school,’ or ‘parochial school?’ Or do we need to bring in the Sunday school in its origin as an alternative to Christian education of the church today?

III. Implications of Sunday School movement in ‘trans-national’ migrant world

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries people have migrated trans-nationally, whereas in the late 18th century people migrated nationally. Whether trans-national migration or national migration, the reasons for migration are similar: better opportunities with better job markets for higher incomes, better education, and more satisfying living conditions.

“Immigration” has become a very common worldwide phenomenon.

According to a recent estimate, about 140 million persons – 2 percent of the world’s population – reside in a country where they were not born (Borjas, 2000) An overwhelming majority of this population have migrated for economic reasons, and in the process, have set in motion a huge economic machine that operates in both sending and receiving countries. (Kazemipur, p.1) The receiving countries often look at immigrants as economic assets.

In this paper I would like to limit the scope to social and religious conditions in Canada, even though we see the whole world as engaged in transnational migration. Canada of course is a country formed with immigrants from all over the world, except for aboriginals, 1,172,785.(Statistics Canada, 2006) However, people in the category of the language of 'immigrant,' are 19.8%(out of 31,241,030) according to Statistics Canada 2006. One out of five are identified as recent immigrants who were not born in Canada. In 1956 among total population of 16,080,791, 9,286,126 people lived in cities, whereas 6,794,665 in rural. We notice a dramatic change in 2006. Among the total population of 31,612,897, 26,350,743 live in cities, leaving only 6,262,154 in rural areas. That means the rural population has decreased even though the total population almost doubled. In the cities there are more than four times as many people than in rural areas. According to Statistics Canada 2006, Immigrants accounted for 5.3% of the population living in Canada's rural and small town areas in 2006, or 312,555 people. In contrast, immigrants represented about one-quarter of the total population living in census metropolitan areas. This indicates that the immigrants population increased greatly in the urban metropolis.

Just as migrants life was poor and difficult in the late 18th century in England, so is the present immigrant life harder than what many immigrants have imagined before they immigrated. Over the past quarter century, low-income rates have been rising among immigrants and falling among the Canadian-born. Census data from 2005 suggests male immigrants (in Canada five years or less) earned on average around 65% of that of the comparable Canadian-born. Low-income rate rose among immigrants from 17% to 20%, while it fell among the Canadian-born from 17% to 14%. In 2005, about 22% of immigrants were in low income. In other words, the low-income rate was 60% higher for immigrants than for the Canadian-born in 2005. (Picot, Lu and Hou 2009) Especially recent immigrants from South Asia and Africa who are visible minority face more difficulty economically. They receive lower returns to education, work experience and unionization. (Banerjee, 2009)

And low-income rates are higher among immigrant children than other immigrant age groups and children with Canadian-born parents. Furthermore, low-income rates have been rising faster among immigrant children than other groups of immigrants. Immigrant children's low-income

rate increased from 16% in 1980, to 25% in 2000, and to 27% in 2005, while the rate among Canadian-born children was falling to 15 %. (Picot, Lu and Hou 2009). The low-income rate is highest among children of recent immigrants (during the previous 5 years), which was 42% in 2005. The study says that regardless of the child's age or how household income is measured, higher income tends to be related to better physical, social/emotional, cognitive and behavioural well-being among children.

High levels of educational attainment are not observed among all the children of immigrants; variations are observed by ethnicity and years since immigration. Recent arrival shows a disadvantage in school performance, particularly in reading test scores. (Worswick 2004) Children who arrive in Canada in early childhood are considered to attain higher educational outcomes than those who arrive later. (Abada, Hou and Ram 2009) Especially immigrant children from developing countries have lower university completion rates than those from developed countries. (Halli and Vedanand 2007) These studies show the correlation between acculturation rates and high educational outcomes.

Not only are they facing economic difficulties, but also their social participation is difficult, too. Their social involvement is low. There would be various reasons, for example proficiency in official languages, different educational systems, cultural differences, geographic locations, lack of information, time and material constraints, and difficulty of entering the Canadian labour markets. (Couton and Gaudet 2008) Furthermore the discrimination they encountered in early life in Canada will hinder their social participation and create difficulties in integration to the society. These matters also contribute for recent immigrants to 'segmented assimilation.'

When they became trans-national migration, they were ready to face the hardship of life in isolation and long hours of work, in order to create a solid base for a more comfortable and permanent life in the new home. Trans-national migration was, however, such a costly adventure, both financially and emotionally, whilst considering going back to their countries of origin even more difficult.

The religious condition in 18th century England reminded me of the current religious condition in Canada. Even though over three-quarters of the Canadian population still identify themselves as Christians, the church is

aged and is becoming empty. We often hear of the closure of churches not only in rural but also urban areas. It also represents a mosaic church segregated according to its languages, traditions, cultures and races. Even though society is rapidly becoming multi-cultural, the church is far behind in becoming multi-cultural or intercultural. We are afraid of closing down our churches, but are not very proactive. The church has become more and more “walled-in” from society, or self-content, or struggling to survive as an institution, yet the church nevertheless developed a secular institution with a business mind. The utmost challenge the church faces is “no expectation for the church” from the world, just like how the salt loses its saltiness.

In Canada ‘religious education’ for all people through public education remained until post-World War II. In the later part of the twentieth century the symbolic relationship between the church, school and home has broken down in the Protestant church, whereas the Roman Catholic church continued to receive government funding for religious teaching. (Dyke p.145) Religious education as evangelical terms, teaching for faith, currently remain inside the church separated from the public, whereas public education is totally separated from religious education.

Looking at trans-national migrant scenes in today’s world, I see many similarities with national migration in 18th century England, for example cause of migration, difficulty in life after migration, especially children’s life in a new land. Differences in our day are range of mobility and much broader dislocation, trans-national, and schoolings for basic same education without considering their need. Even little immigrant children have to spend their time by themselves after school or kindergarten, without care.

Their worlds are comforted by TV and Video games. Whereas children in the 18th century ran outside in the street, children in the 21st century shut themselves in their little solitudes, even on Saturdays and Sundays.

Social conditions of the 21st century call for the spirit of the Sunday School movement. Retaining Sunday school in its present form is not the answer to this call. No other institutions are picking up the call from the marginal, immigrant community from the bottom of the society. Society needs compassionate and philanthropic “religion” and “education” for acculturation and morality of the children to make the new strange land their home. The Sunday School’s response to the call can be, for example,

afternoon school, weekend school, leadership school, or cultural school for all people at no charge, which will in turn bring “religion” and “education” together. Yes, various forms of the Sunday School can be alternatives to Christian education of the church today. Then the work so aptly pioneered by Robert Raikes will bear fruit again in our day.

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