METHODISM, MORAL EDUCATION AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS:
A LOOK INTO THE PAST
by Thomas C. Hunt

In 1870, in its annual conference, the Methodist Episcopal Church in Wisconsin issued a ringing declaration of support for the traditional tieup of Protestant Christianity with public education. In an official document entitled "The Relation of the Church to the Common School," the Methodist Church declared that the public school system was the "offspring" of the Bible, and that Protestant Christianity was "especially bound to resist" any "assaults" made upon that school system "from whatever source or whatever pretext." Some sixty years later the relationship had taken on a much more informal form. For instance, of 296 Superintendents of Schools who reported their religion in a study conducted in 1934, 93 percent reported they attended church; there were only 6 Catholics, no Jews or Agnostics, but there were 264 Methodists.

By 1976, however, official Methodism at least, had been completely divorced from public schooling. In its 1976 edition of The Book of Discipline no mention is made of public schooling. There are sections entitled "Education and Cultivation Division," "Curriculum Resources Committee," etc., and a number of subdivisions of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. The absence of Methodist involvement with public schooling today is especially interesting given the deep and widespread concern Fundamentalists/Evangelicals are currently demonstrating in American education. (The best estimates on these schools founded since the early 1960s range from 5,000 to 6,000 in number with a student population

of approximately 950,000).  

Perhaps Methodist involvement with and concern for public schooling in the 19th century cannot be more clearly illustrated than in Wisconsin. It is the purpose of this paper to treat of that involvement and concern, so much a part of the Methodist-public education heritage in this nation, beginning with the state's first constitutional convention in 1846 and terminating with the Edgerton Bible decision in 1890, the first in the nation by a State Supreme Court to adjudge Bible-reading to be sectarian instruction and therefore illegal.

Church, State and Schooling at the Constitutional Convention

The Education Committee of the 1846 Wisconsin Constitutional Convention called for the establishment of a "system of common schools" throughout the state, said schools to be free from all "sectarian instruction," as well as prohibiting any "book of religious doctrine or belief" to be used therein. The Convention delegates removed the prohibition against a "book of religious doctrine or belief," after "some discussion in the convention," the amended version so popular that "but one or two voices were heard against it." Wisconsin voters rejected the proposed Constitution in 1846. Two years later they approved a revised form and Wisconsin was admitted to the Union. This Constitution treated religious freedom in Article I, Section 18:

The right of every man to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of his own conscience, shall never be infringed, nor shall any man be compelled to attend, erect, or support any place of worship, or maintain any ministry against his consent. Nor shall any control of, or interference with the rights of conscience be permitted, or any preference be given by law to any religious establishments, or mode of worship. Nor shall any money be drawn from the treasury for the benefit of religious societies, or religious or theological seminaries.

It dealt with the issue of sectarian instruction in Article X, Section 3:

The legislature shall provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable, and such schools shall be free and without
charge for tuition to all children between the ages of four and twenty years, and no sectarian instruction shall be allowed therein. 9

It is worthy of notice that the words "no book of religious doctrine or belief" were not included in the prohibition against sectarian instruction, indicating that the framers did not consider the Bible to be a sectarian book. 10 That the schools were not to be non-sectarian was made resoundingly clear by a 57-2 vote against the practice of sectarian instruction in the public schools of the state. 11

Governmental documents of that period attest to the moral function of the public schools. The Education Committee of the Wisconsin Senate in 1848, for instance, placed the credit for the Scotch being "perhaps the best instructed and most moral people on earth" to tax-supported public schools. 12 The Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin, 1849 held the State Superintendent accountable to "discourage the use of sectarian books and sectarian instruction in the schools." 13 From their official responses to inquiries, it is clear that the first two State Superintendents, Eleazar Root and Azel P. Ladd, did not regard the Bible as a sectarian book nor the practice of reading it in the public schools as sectarian instruction. 14

Methodism, Schooling and the State in the 1850s

Fifty-one of the 69 men who framed the Constitution in 1848 were born in the east, 26 in New England, 25 in New York (4 hailed from Ireland and 1 from Germany). 15 Their role was described as being "chiefly instrumental in laying the foundations of the commonwealth of

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9 The Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin, 1849. (Southport: C. Latham Sholes, 1849), p. 34.
12 Journal of the Senate of the First Legislature of the State of Wisconsin, 1848. (Madison: Phenodyne A. Bird, 1848), Appendix 7, p. 34.
13 The Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin, 1849, pp. 404-05.
Wisconsin."16 In 1850, Wisconsin's population was 305,391; 54,132 were natives of the state; 139,166 had been born elsewhere in the United States; there were 110,471 of foreign origin.17

The Census of 1850 does not include the religious adherence of the state's inhabitants. It does have a section on Churches which affords some assistance in identifying the religious climate of the state. There were, in 1850, 356 church edifices in Wisconsin, of which 64 were Roman Catholic, 20 were Lutheran, 19 Episcopalian, 49 Baptist, 110 Methodist, 40 Presbyterian and 37 Congregationalist,18 indicating the strong Methodist presence in the state. Methodist sources list 8,284 members19 (compared with “about 40,000” Catholics in 1848), with 3,198 Baptists21 and 1,356 Episcopalians.22 (The reports by the various Churches are not definitive of relative strength either, due to different criteria as to what constitutes a “member.” The Catholic Church, for instance, practices infant Baptism and lists all baptized as members. In some Protestant denominations a person becomes a member when he/she reaches young adulthood.)

Methodists, who along with Congregationalists, Presbyterians and sometimes Baptists, comprised what may be termed “mainstream Protestantism,” were generally satisfied with the form of public schooling promulgated by Horace Mann and followed in Wisconsin at this time. Featured by Bible-reading (the King James version) with attendant devotional exercises, the common schools operated in a moral, indeed religious, fashion but, allegedly, in a non-denominational or unsectarian way.

A Drift Towards Heterogeneity

As the 1850s progressed the consensus which undergirded the moral role of public schooling in Wisconsin was increasingly challenged. Some citizens questioned the “non-denominational” nature of the Bible-based religious exercises. As early as 1854 State Superintendent H. A. Wright

18Ibid., pp. 934-35.
advised an appellant that such exercises should be discontinued if "such Book and exercises are objected to by the parents or guardians of any child attending such school. . . ."\(^{23}\)

Controversies over public education's moral thrust continued to rise. They reflected the changing composition of the state's population and their beliefs. (In 1860 Wisconsin ranked second to California in the percentage of its residents from a foreign country.)\(^{24}\)

Church membership statistics tell an interesting story. Methodists had increased from 8,284 in 1850 to 18,636 in 1860;\(^{25}\) Catholics had grown from "about 40,000" in 1848 to 180,000 in 1860.\(^{26}\) Little wonder that Superintendent Josiah L. Pickard (1860-1864) recorded in his memoirs, when referring to appeals, that "The subject of religious exercises in schools was more frequently presented than any other."\(^{27}\)

Evidences of mainstream Protestantism remained. The State Superintendents' official Reports in the 1860s listed the Bible as a "recommended textbook" for public schools. (Local school boards were empowered to determine its use.) It was listed, along with Cowdery's Moral Lessons, in the "Moral Instruction" category.\(^{28}\) Another recommended text which mirrored Protestant moral teaching was Wayland's Moral Science, which described the New Testament as the "final revelation of the will of God to man," containing "all the moral precepts both of natural religion and of the Old Testament," and "whatever else it was important to our salvation that we should know."\(^{29}\)


Further Erosion — and Methodist Alarm

In the 1860s the pages of the Wisconsin Journal of Education, as well as the official state education documents, while testifying to the traditional Protestant orientation of public schools in the main, also reveal the stirrings of dissent. Figures obtained from the U.S. Census of 1870 document a further trend towards cultural and religious, soon to be political and educational, heterogeneity. The number of Catholics had grown to approximately 250,000. Methodist population increased to 23,313. The U.S. Census reported 329 Catholic Church organizations with 304 edifices, permitting 104,000 “Sittings” and valued at $1,334,450. Comparable figures for Wisconsin Methodists were 508 Church organizations maintaining 396 buildings with 103,240 “Sittings” and valued at $973,018.

In 1870 the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church came out in support of Samuel Fallows, who had been Secretary of the Wisconsin Conference, for State Superintendent of Public Instruction. An ordained Methodist minister, who had served as pastor of Methodist congregations in Oshkosh and Milwaukee, Fallows had been a Colonel in the “God and Morality” Union regiment in the Civil War. (Fallows became an Episcopalian in 1875. In 1876 he was made a Bishop.) He was appointed State Superintendent in 1870.

That same year the Wisconsin Conference of Methodists, having recognized the changed complexion of the state and its impact on public education, promulgated an official, far-reaching document in which they set forth their position on “The Relation of the Church to the Common School.” Beginning with the contention that “The Common School system is the offspring of the religion of the Bible,” the Methodists argued that “nowhere, except among Evangelical Protestants has a plan of instruction, embracing all the children of the Community ever been

33Minutes of the Twenty-Fourth Session of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1870, p. 42.
adopted.”\textsuperscript{35} In the Methodists’ view, “Christianity alone” prescribed the “requisite inspiration for a system of education impartial and universal.” Christianity had originated the system, maintained and nurtured it, and was now called upon “to repel the assaults now made upon the system.”\textsuperscript{36}

The forces aimed at the destruction of the “Common Schools of our country,” were the “union of heterogeneous forces aiming at opposite results yet combining at almost the only possible point of contact.” The first group, the Roman Catholics, “do not desire to abolish religious instruction in schools; they rather wish to increase it,” making it “rigidly sectarian and exclusive which is inconsistent with all freedom of thought or conscience.” Hence, they wanted the system abolished and denominational schools erected in their stead. The second party, representing “atheistic influence,” wished to substitute “one great irreligious sect” for the “present healthy balancing and counterbalancing of various religious sects.”\textsuperscript{37}

Taking note of the increasing attacks on the use of the Bible in public schools, the Methodists contended that the drive for its exclusion constituted a “very shallow” pretense. It was, really, “all positive religious instruction” that was objected to. Somewhat plaintively the Methodists asked,

\ldots are the cherished convictions of a great people to be sacrificed to the abnormal prejudices and caprices of exceptional individuals, the majority of whom have come among us to avail themselves of advantages and privileges which are the direct offspring of a system whose main features and essential elements they ask the destruction.\textsuperscript{38}

Public schools, the Methodists averred, should continue to impart the “moral and religious principles” which were “indispensable to the promotion of the manly and womanly character which is the true end of all education.” The Church’s duty, then, in regard to the public schools, was “totally obvious.” First, it “must cherish and maintain the system.” Anything else would result in abandoning youth to “ignorance and the other concomitants of vice and degradation.” Second, no part of the mind or character should be neglected in the “Common Schools.” Which meant, the Methodists argued, that the “religious principles of the Bible” which have been the “basis and inspiration of the system from the beginning” should “continue to inform and animate it.”\textsuperscript{39}

The Catholics had long been perceived as enemies of the common

\textsuperscript{35} “The Relation of the Church to the Common School,” in the Minutes of the Twenty-Fourth Session of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1870, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., pp. 29-30.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 31.
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schools. Now, however, a second enemy had been identified: the atheists (or secularists). What had happened? After the Civil War public education leaders in the north focused more of their attention on issues such as compulsory attendance legislation, the certification of teachers and accreditation of schools. The tenure of Samuel Fallows' term of office is one illustration of these concerns. His *Annual Reports* of 1870, 1871, 1872 and 1873 dealt with compulsory attendance, several treated of its need and the state's duty to provide an education to each child which will fit that child "for the responsibilities and duties of good citizenship." Nowhere is there found an exhortation on the moral role of the public schools, so evident years before.

Other concerns over the pan-Protestant moral tone of public schools were sounded in the state. An editorial in the *Wisconsin Journal of Education* in 1872 had identified Protestantism, albeit in second place to Catholicism, as a threat to the schools' religious neutrality, which "demands to be recognized in public education." In 1878 the city of Milwaukee's Common Council passed resolutions against Bible-reading and other devotions in public schools. That same year a bill was introduced into the Wisconsin Assembly which would have prohibited prayer and Bible-reading in the public educational institutions of the state. It was defeated 48-30. A year later, in 1879, Robert C. Spencer, the President of the Milwaukee Liberal League, charged in an open letter that religious exercises in public educational settings violated both the state and federal constitutions. These concerns were to resound much louder in the decade ahead.

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42*Proceedings of the Common Council and Ordinances of the City of Milwaukee, for the Year Ending April 17th, 1878.*, pp. 250-51.


The 1880s — The Gathering Storm

The respective Churches constitute the only available sources for their populations in Wisconsin in 1880. Methodists reported 26,434, up from 23,313 in 1870. Roman Catholics, meanwhile, numbered an estimated 308,000. It was in 1880 that the Methodists referred to the need to engage in "missionary work among the Germans" in the state for the first time, testifying both to the increasing presence of "foreigners" in the state and the recognition that this growing phenomenon needed to be addressed.

The Reverend C. H. Payne, writing in The Methodist Quarterly Review in 1880, expressed Methodist concern over the relation of religion to education prevalent at that time. Describing the period as "transitional if not revolting," Payne argued that complete secularization of public education would subvert the goal of educating the whole person. Further, government neutrality to religion amounted to antagonism. By eliminating the Bible from its schools, evidently considered a possibility, the nation would make it impossible to educate its citizens.

In 1883, taking note of the spreading contention over religious practices in public schools, the State of Wisconsin legislature mandated that "no text book shall be permitted in any free public schools which would have a tendency to inculcate sectarian ideas." That same year, the English-language Catholic newspaper published in Milwaukee, the Catholic Citizen, complained of the gross under-representation of Catholics in policy-making positions on state agencies. Though they constituted approximately one-fourth of the state's population in 1883, and operated more charitable institutions in the state than did all the Protestant denominations combined, there were no Catholics invited by Governor Rusk to the National Conference of Charities that year; there was nary a Catholic on the State Board of Supervisors of Charities; nor was there a Catholic on the University of Wisconsin's

49The Laws of Wisconsin, Except City Charters and Their Amendments, Passed at the Biennial Session of the Legislature of 1883. (Madison: Democrat Printing Co., State Printer, 1883), Chapter 253, Section 4, pp. 202-03.
Board of Regents; in fact, of ten state boards which had a total membership of ninety, there were no Catholics.  

Periodical literature of the period reveals that, nationally, the traditional relationship between Protestant Christianity and the public school which regarded the public schools as the offspring of Protestantism (and the Bible), neither “Romanizing nor secularizing” public education, continued to have its adherents. The support, however, was far from unanimous. Some writers advocated a secular basis of morality for public schools. Others wondered whether Protestants ought to establish their own church day schools.

The Conflict Peaks — The Edgerton Bible Case

The conflict came to a head in Wisconsin in 1886 when a group of Catholic parents in Edgerton challenged the practice of reading the King James version of the Bible in that city. The petitioners asserted that the reading violated the rights of conscience of their children, constituted sectarian instruction, and therefore violated Article X, Section 3 of the Wisconsin Constitution, which forbade sectarian instruction in public educational institutions. The Board denied that the practice in question constituted sectarian instruction.

In Circuit Court the presiding Judge ruled against Weiss et al., and found in favor of the defendant. Whereupon the petitioners appealed to the Supreme Court of Wisconsin.
On March 17, 1890 the Supreme Court handed down its unanimous (5-0) decision which overturned the ruling of the Circuit Court. In the three opinions which were written the practice of Bible-reading (with attendant devotional exercises) was ruled unconstitutional because it: 1) constituted sectarian instruction and was thus in violation of Article X, Section 3; and 2) was worship, thus taking public monies for the support of worship, forbidden by Article I, Section 18. The third opinion, written by Justice Orton, maintained that the state and all of its institutions were secular, and perforce had to be completely divorced from anything related to religion. Contradictory to mainstream Protestant (including Methodist) thought, Orton argued that the Bible and religion were harmful and destructive to civil institutions.

Methodist Reaction

No Protestant group exceeded the anguish and concern which was expressed over the decision by Methodism in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Conference of Methodists, meeting in 1890, recorded their "surprise and pain" at the decision which declared the "Bible a sectarian book." They ordered that a commission of five persons be established "to cooperate with other denominations in such action as may be thought necessary." The West Wisconsin Conference deplored the decision, averring that the banning of the Bible emphasized "sectarianism" and tended "toward the much dreaded 'union of Church and State'," though they did not elaborate how this was to result from the Court's ruling.

The German Methodists, meeting in La Crosse, registered their disapproval, and resolved to use their "influence toward a reversal of the decision." Opposition in Methodist quarters was not limited to Wisconsin. The Methodist Education Conference, meeting in New York, termed the decision "un-American and pagan, and a menace to the perpetuity of our institutions."

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59 Justice John B. Cassoday, Ibid., pp. 23-32.
60 Justice Harlow S. Orton, Ibid., pp. 32-35.
61 Minutes of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Forty-Fourth Session 1890. (John Schneider, Editor and Publisher, 1890), p. 62.
62 Minutes of the Thirty-Sixth Annual Session of the West Wisconsin Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1890. (Evansville: R. M. Antes, 1890), pp. 47-50.
63 Milwaukee Sentinel. May 5, 1890, p. 8.
64 The Bible in the Public Schools. Newspaper Clippings. A Scrapbook in the Library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.
Some Methodist ministers took up the cudgels in their pulpits. One leading critic of the decision was the Reverend Mr. Creighton of the Summerfield Methodist Church in Milwaukee (the same Church which Samuel Fallows had been pastor of in the 1860s). Creighton thundered that the Court had ousted the Bible from the schools at the demand of the “Romish hierarchy.” It was the Church of Rome, he contended, that alone felt the Bible was a sectarian book, whereas in reality it was “actually a book common to all Christian religions and indeed the very foundation of humanity.” The Church of Rome, which kept the Bible from its own members, was victorious and now would press on, working for “the downfall of public schools and the establishment of sectarian schools on their ruins.” He forecast a backlash by “Bible America” against the “foreign autocrat” (evidently the Pope), who had engineered the decision, which would eventually result in its overturn.

The Reverend F. S. Stein, of the Washington Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church in Milwaukee, placed the onus for the decision on the Roman Catholics. The public schools, supported by their Christian origins, had the making of good American citizens as their goal. Once moral instruction was divorced from the public schools, accomplished by outlawing the Bible which should “be the standard text book on morality in every school room,” the very purpose for which the public schools were founded was unattainable. Of all the Christian denominations only the Catholics, Stein asserted, were opposed to keeping the Bible in the schools, thus showing the claim of “sectarianism” to be “baseless.” The Catholic clergy, using the “coercive power of the priesthood,” were adamant in their desire to have Catholic children in Catholic schools, where they could “develop a clannish, sectarian and un-American spirit in their pupils.” Once having driven the Bible from the public schools, Stein concluded, the Catholic Church will cry out that the public schools are “godless” (“for which condition, if it exists, they are responsible”), with the ultimate “aim at the abolition of our school system.”

Another Methodist clergyman to lash out at the decision was the Reverend D. C. John of Racine. John said the Court’s decision would lead youngsters to think that the Bible, the word of God, was a corrupt book. He saw only ignominious ends for a society which showed disrespect for the word of God, as Wisconsin had with the Edgerton decision. Before a meeting of the Methodist Ministerial

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65 Milwaukee Sentinel. April 14, 1890, p. 12.
67 Milwaukee Sentinel. April 21, 1890, p. 1.
Association John characterized the decision as a "menace to Christian civilization," one which "threatens to sap the foundation of public morality and make good the taunt of the Romanist, that our schools are godless, and therefore unworthy of Christian patronage." 68

But dissent did exist in the Methodist camp. The Reverend T. DeWitt Peake, Pastor of the Methodist Church at Merrill, saw "nothing anti-Christian, nothing anti-Protestant, nothing un-American" in the decision. Rather, he declared, "the decision will serve to better the cause of truth and the Christian religion." The Court had stood for liberty when it protected the Catholic conscience, which had the right not to be trampled upon, whatever Protestants (Methodists) might think of it. Peake saw no way that the Court could have avoided declaring the Bible to be a sectarian book. He urged his flock to accept the decision as just, and to channel their energies into religious instruction of their youth at home and in Church ("the Sunday-school rises into an importance of which that institution had no conception"). 69

Religious-Socio-Political Realities in 1890

As noted earlier, Milo Quaife had referred to the influential policy role played by "Men of the old American stock, from the northeastern section of the Union, . . ." in laying the foundation of the State of Wisconsin in the 1840s. 70 In 1848, 51 of the 69 framers of the Constitution hailed from that portion of the United States. 71 By 1888 the situation had changed drastically. Twelve of the 33 members of the State Senate were from New York/New England, 8 were of foreign birth; of the State Assembly's 100 members, 37 were born in foreign countries, only 26 were from the northeastern section of the United States. 72 Similar changes had occurred in the state's population at large, so that by 1890, 73.7 percent of Wisconsin's population was either foreign-born or with at least one parent foreign-born. 73 As for

69The Bennett Law. Newspaper Clippings.
73Ibid., pp. 577-85.
political strength, 52.9 percent of the adult males (eligible voters) in Wisconsin were either foreign-born or had at least one parent born in a foreign country. Wisconsin ranked third in the Union in this category.

In 1890 there were 556,355 persons reported to be members of Churches in Wisconsin; 249,164 of these were Catholic, 160,919 were Lutheran, together constituting 74 percent of religious membership in the State. There were 43,696 Methodists. Overall, 32.98 percent of Wisconsin's residents were listed as members of Churches. The demographic changes were accompanied by substantial alterations in educational and other policy decisions.

Conclusion

In 1886 the Catholic Citizen had referred to the public schools as "Methodist Sunday Schools under false pretenses." Responding to the objections to the decision presented by the Methodist clergy Creighton and John in 1890, the Citizen editorialized that if Bible-reading was so essential to education then Methodists should establish their own parochial schools, unless, the editor mused, they were too stingy. The commission established by the Methodists in 1890 to seek denominational cooperation to effect a reversal of the decision offered no remedies. (Parallel committees established by the state's Baptists and Presbyterians in 1890 had similar results.)

The decision, the first of its kind in the nation, signalled the beginning of the end of the historic tie between mainstream Protestantism (of which Methodism was an integral part) and public education. With the ruling in the Edgerton case "the pattern of the decisions on Bible-reading began to change."

For Methodists, the decision served as a portent of things to come. In Wisconsin after 1890 the public schools were no longer constitutionally able to be used as the vehicle to impart Protestant moral

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75Ibid., p. 484.
76Ibid., p. 430.
79Catholic Citizen. February 20, 1886, p. 4.
80Ibid., April 16, 1890, p. 4.
teaching. Other forms of instilling religion and morality into the lives of the young, namely the Church and the home, would need to receive greater emphasis. Gradually the trend established by Edgerton continued throughout the nation, culminating in the decision of the United States Supreme Court in the School District of Abington Township v. Schempp 374 U.S. 203 (1963) case, which enunciated a similar doctrine as Edgerton, but was effective on the national level. The marriage between the public schools on one hand and Protestantism (including Methodism), so firm before 1890, and so evident in the 1870 Methodist document, "The Relation of the Church to the Common School," had its first official rupture in 1890 in Wisconsin. The 1976 edition of The Book of Discipline shows that it has ended in divorce.