
The Struggle for the Soul: A Jewish Response to Bible Reading and Religion in American Public Schools, 1900–1915

Joakim Isaacs

Introduction

America has long been known as a country based on ideals derived from the Bible. This being so, it is no surprise that there have been many efforts to educate American children in accordance with biblical values. Such efforts naturally raise the question of whether public schools can teach biblical values in a manner consistent with another important American ideal, the separation of church and state. As Richard McMillen has noted:

The believer and the agnostic have claimed equal rights to define the limits of moral indoctrination. Christian and Jew have wrestled with the hard question of how the schools could transmit their common ethical heritage without exposing their profound disagreement on the nature and authority of Jesus Christ. Protestants and Roman Catholics found it impossible to agree on which version of the Bible was to be read in the schools if indeed it was to be read at all.¹

In America, the disestablishment of church and state was influenced by three factors: the English Act of Toleration, the diversity of sects in the colonies, and most crucial, the fact that Christianity lacked sufficient unity or adequate power to effect the establishment of one of its sects. Will Herberg has noted that it was these mutual rivalries rather than the First Amendment's granting of freedom of religion that was in fact crucial in the development of the American pattern known as separation of church and state.²

R. F. Butts has developed this theme and writes that "with few exceptions the major Protestant denominations turned more and more to the idea of a nonsectarian common school. This was sometimes the result of weariness with sectarian ideological disputes, sometimes in

recognition of added expense of independent denominational effort, and sometimes of a genuine belief in the priority of a political community as the goal of training in common citizenship.”³ As Robert Ullrich has noted, there was no design to drive religion out of the school, and this took place as an accidental result of the social diversity in society at large. Others have noted that a lack of teachers, money, and leadership in the parochial schools allowed education to come under the control of the state.⁴

It was clear by the end of the nineteenth century that church religion had generally been denied a primary role in the common, or public, school. It was also clear, however, that Americans neither sought nor desired a public school atmosphere devoid of all religious influence. Neither radical atheism nor radical secularism flourished.

Around this time the Roman Catholic Church began seeking state support for its parochial schools. The church based its argument on the fact that the public school system was permeated by nondenominational Protestantism. In response, Protestants were forced either to recognize the justice of the Catholic claims or to remove Protestant practices from the schools. They reluctantly made a pretense of doing the latter, but little progress was actually made, especially in rural areas, where a homogeneous Protestant population only too willingly acquiesced in Bible readings, prayers, and celebration of Christian holidays. Yet Protestant ministers in the period from 1860 to 1900 were equally concerned that many urban areas with heterogeneous populations had been forced to drop such practices and thus moral education was in truth disappearing from the curriculum in the guise of “sectarian influences.”

At the turn of the century, fundamentalist Protestant groups felt that the public schools had gone too far in removing religion from the schools and it was time to reverse the trend. Protestant influence and prestige were waning, and among the factors blamed for the decline were (1) the arrival of a large mass of Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and (2) the rapid urbanization of the country, which was causing an erosion of rural Protestant values. In an attempt to combat these forces Protestant clergymen fought for control of the public school curriculum and a return to what they termed “moral education.” A campaign was begun to extend the practice of reading the King James Version of the Bible as part of school

exercises. In addition, various other schemes were attempted to teach religion in the framework of the public schools, such as released time.

Contrary to today's view of a monolithic Jewish response to this challenge in favor of separation of church and state, Jews of that era were deeply divided. The vast majority of Jewish children were enrolled in the public schools, forcing Jews to wrestle with the issue. Some believed that complete separation of church and state outlawed both Bible reading and released time. Others felt there should be accommodation for religion in the schools. This latter group thought it ironic that Judaism, which had given the Bible to the world, should come out on the side of atheism. Various Jewish organizations took official stands but many of their members took diametrically opposite positions. As a whole the Reform movement was against Bible reading in the schools but favored the concept of released time, while the Orthodox opposed both ideas in favor of maintaining a rigid separation of church and state.

Status of Bible Reading in 1905

The first challenge to the status quo was an attempt by the Protestant clergy to extend the practice of Bible reading. In 1910 the states could be divided into five classes as far as Bible reading was concerned. Nine states mandated the practice in their state constitutions.⁵ Typical of this group was the Georgia constitution, which declared, "The Bible shall not be excluded from the Common or public schools of the state."⁶ More restrictive language was found in the Massachusetts constitution, which stated, "The School Committee shall require daily reading of some portion of the Bible without written note or oral comment."⁷ The reason for the latter restriction was to prevent "sectarianism" from entering the schools. As long as the student body was Protestant and the Protestant Bible was read without any comment, no problem was envisioned by the drafters of the constitution. The problem would arise, of course, when the non-Protestants in the classroom perceived the reading as sectarian. The problem could simply not be "wished away" as North Dakota attempted to do in its constitution when it declared, "The Bible shall not be deemed a sectarian book. It shall not be excluded from any public school."⁸

In a second group of states the practice of Bible reading in the

schools was on a less firm footing.⁹ In these twelve states Bible reading was not mandated by the constitution but had been ordered by school superintendents and upheld by the courts.

In yet a third group of eighteen states, the Bible was read on the basis of local custom and public sentiment with specific sanctions from school boards or courts.¹⁰ In most of these states the practices in local school districts varied widely.

In four states there was currently no Bible reading in the schools but neither was there any law forbidding it.¹¹

Finally, in only five states, the Bible was banned from the schools because of adverse rulings by the courts, the attorney general, or the school superintendents.¹²

There was, therefore, much room for Protestant clergy to work in expanding the number of states which would embrace Bible reading on the basis of a constitutional mandate and, failing that, to expand the number of states in which Bible readings were sanctioned by law or official action.

Typical of the program of the Protestant clergy was the following resolution by the ministers of Portland, Oregon:

We should form a permanent organization that will give teachers in our public schools to understand that they must give the Bible and the principles of Jesus Christ due consideration when they are instilling into the minds of the children under their charge the instruction which they must give them. There is a growing disregard of God and God's church and God's work and God's way, and the only way we can overcome that is by teaching children through the public schools.¹³

To carry out this program, various tactics were employed. Where opposition was strong, the ministers attempted to place the Bible in the curriculum as part of the study of literature. The *Portland Jewish Tribune* noted that while the Bible had literary merit, teaching it was bound to reflect the denominational flavor of the teacher.¹⁴

Another tactic employed by the advocates of Bible reading was to allow those who objected to be excused. The *American Israelite* protested that pupils were likely to view a teacher's request to attend a Bible reading as a command. Further, in an argument later to be picked up by the United States Supreme Court, the paper pointed out that

compulsory school attendance laws rendered compulsory all that went on in school.¹⁵

The Jewish Reaction

At the turn of the century, the problem of Bible readings in the schools deeply divided the Jewish community. Many wished to find some way to incorporate the practice that would provide protection for the Jewish minority, while others viewed it as a form of missionizing and a dangerous breach of the wall of separation. Jews, like their Catholic counterparts, objected vehemently to the use of the King James Version of the Bible. Catholics tended to regard the use of the King James Version as an issue that would help rally the faithful. It was not the translation itself that was at issue so much as the fact that it was a product of the Protestant Reformation, and thus not the version used by the church. Although there were theological differences between Protestant and Catholic translations of the Bible, the Catholic opponents of Bible reading did not dwell on these, and in any case they usually occurred in passages (e.g., parts of the Book of Daniel) that were highly unlikely to be chosen for school Bible readings. Jews had the additional problem of not accepting the concept of the "Old" Testament and of course not accepting the "New Testament" as holy writ. Yet Bible reading was already practiced in many public schools, and Protestant ministers constantly sought to expand their numbers.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinical organization, led the largely successful fight against the spread of Bible reading in the schools. In 1906 the CCAR published a pamphlet entitled *Why the Bible Should Not Be Read in the Public Schools*. The pamphlet was distributed in every state where the issue was being debated. It argued that the whole trend in public education had been toward the removal of religious exercises, and thus the current drive was reactionary and against the "spirit of the times." The pamphlet also argued that the choice of the King James Version, even if the reading was unaccompanied by comment, was in itself a sectarian act. The pamphlet further pointed out that most teachers brought their own individual beliefs into the classroom. Thus atheist teachers would read the text cynically. The pamphlet cited abuses by teachers

in various states and complained that Bible reading invariably led to other aspects of religion invading the schoolroom.¹⁶

In addition to issuing the pamphlet, the CCAR went on record with a statement which read in part,

The place of the Bible is in the home, the church, and the church school. To force it into public institutions is not merely to suggest that these three agencies are powerless to effect the desired results, but likewise to interfere with the growth of a finer human brotherhood. It has created ill feeling between Catholic and Protestant, and had caused both to look down on the Jew.¹⁷

These views were echoed by a committee of rabbis in New York representing a broad spectrum of Jewish beliefs and denominations.

Not all Jewish leaders, however, concurred with this view. A 1909 survey of Reform rabbis in which sixty rabbis responded found that nineteen favored Bible reading in the schools without reservations. Five more responded that they would favor it if the sectarian bias could be removed. Thus nearly one-half of the respondents disagreed with the official position of the Reform movement. Even the thirty-six who opposed the Bible reading were not monolithic in their views. Several noted that they would favor Bible reading if sectarian bias could be removed, but were voting to oppose Bible reading because they felt that sectarian bias was inevitable. A yearning for religious education and knowledge of the Bible to be more widely disseminated was clearly in the mind-set of many of the rabbis, and thus there were divisions in the movement despite the "official" position of its own rabbinical organization.¹⁸

The period down to World War I saw repeated attempts to introduce legislation or constitutional amendments on Bible reading. Thanks to the efforts of the CCAR and other Jewish groups, many were defeated. However, a few succeeded. In Texas, where school Bible readings had previously been sanctioned by custom, they were now made mandatory under the new state constitution. In addition, the King James Version of the Bible was the only translation permitted. The *American Israelite* complained that this was a clear union of church and state. Catholics, it said, could retreat to the parochial school, but Jews did not have either the resources or the desire to emulate them.¹⁹

The role of opposing Bible readings was not a congenial one for those who took up the struggle. Rabbi Solomon Foster of Newark,

New Jersey, caused a controversy by attacking Bible reading and religion at an interreligious ministerial conference held in his community. He was quickly taken to task by the editor of the *American Hebrew*, who noted that many Jews were beginning to doubt the desirability of an entirely secular education, and that Judaism certainly had never stood for secularism. The editorial concluded by saying, "It does indeed seem somewhat incongruous that it should be left to a Jewish minister even to seem to protest against Bible teaching in the Public School."²⁰

Many others were also troubled to find themselves thrust into the same camp as the secularists, socialists, and atheists. They did not relish being pictured as "enemies of religion," especially since they shared many of the same concerns as the supporters of Bible reading. They too decried Bible illiteracy and the lack of religious education. They too felt the total inadequacy of the home and Sunday school to produce a religiously educated or religiously motivated population.

Released Time: Early Plans

The response to this challenge led to a growing interest in released time as a way to use the public school to buttress religious education. Many released-time schemes had support from elements of the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy.

One of the first proposals was the idea of Vernon Purminton Squires, a minister, professor of literature, and dean of the College of Arts and Science at the University of North Dakota. In 1911, Professor Squires developed the idea of teaching religion off the school premises but giving public school credit to those who attended. Since the courses could use any version of the Bible, a highly sensitive issue was avoided. Moreover, since the courses were elective and took place off the school premises, they could not be construed as coercive in any way. While the North Dakota plan required the student to pass an exam made up by school authorities, based on both the Christian and Jewish Bibles, Reverend Squires was willing to have a course tailored to Jewish students or alternatively to have the current course taught by a rabbi. Obviously this plan affected few Jews anyway, given the sparsity of Jews in North Dakota, and it did not attract much Jewish support outside of that state.²¹

Colorado employed a similar plan with similar results.²² Bir-

mingham, Alabama, adopted a plan that was co-sponsored by Rabbi Morris Newfield, the Reform rabbi of the city. It simply allowed students to get credit for any extracurricular activity which involved learning. If a Sunday school, music school, or manual training institute certified that a student had completed the course work, credit was given. The advantage was that the public school was not involved in accrediting the syllabus or administering the test. At the same time, of course, the public school had no control over the quality of the work for which it was giving credit.²³ None of these plans were adopted, copied, or given much attention outside of their own localities.

The Gary Plan

The plan which gained the most popularity and was to be most widely adopted originated in Gary, Indiana. It was designed by the innovative educator William Wirt, who believed that education should be training for life. He argued that a longer school day would allow greater flexibility in scheduling and maximize the use of school space. Traditional school work, study, and play would all be accommodated in a school day which ran from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Each grade would have a different schedule so that some students would be engaged in formal schooling while others would be doing homework or playing. The supervised play and study time was optional; students were excused if their parents preferred to have them at home or at private music or dance classes. Wirt had no thought that the excused time could be used for religious education. His vision was concerned solely with an educational reform that would keep the children in a controlled environment during the day and away from the evil influences of the street.²⁴

When Wirt's plan was promulgated, the principal of the Orthodox Talmud Torah in Gary met with him in order to discuss accommodating it to his institution's special needs. Since Talmud Torahs had always operated after school, the longer school hours posed a problem. Wirt quickly realized that the principal's visit opened a whole new horizon. If his plan could be shown to facilitate religious instruction during the "permissive" periods of the day, it would win valuable allies. Thus, in the spring of 1914, Wirt proposed to the ministers of

Gary that religious instruction be included as an option for students. Little did Wirt realize that as the plan expanded to other cities, such invitations would win not only valuable allies but implacable opponents.²⁵

In the fall of 1914 seven Gary churches and the Orthodox and Reform synagogues joined the program. Some 4,000 students, one-fifth of the school population, enrolled. Religious instruction was provided outside the school premises in the same way that private music and dance lessons had previously been permitted. The public school system did not keep attendance records for religious instruction. Pupils who handed in a parental request and left school were deemed to be in the legal custody of their parents. The parental request was not required to specify what activity the child was attending. The child could thus be going home, to music or art lessons, or to the church or synagogue. The plan worked in Gary with little friction. There was one minister who came to speak in a public school on a nonreligious matter and attempted to proselytize for his own released-time program. He was reprimanded, however, and this was considered only an isolated incident.²⁶

Expansion of the Gary Plan

The Gary program's impact on Jews grew greater when the program was introduced into one school in Brooklyn, New York, in 1914 and then expanded into the Bronx a year later. In 1915, of the 831,000 students in the public schools eligible for the program 340,000 entered the released-time program. This included 190,000 Protestant children, 108,000 Catholics, and 41,000 Jews.²⁷

The reaction of the organized Jewish community was, as has been noted, mixed, and, as in the case of Bible reading, individual rabbis did not necessarily agree with the stand taken by their movements. The CCAR went on record as favoring released time, on the grounds that it would remove the religious issue, i.e., Bible readings, from the school premises and would greatly expand the number of students receiving religious instruction.²⁸

The Union of Orthodox Congregations opposed the plan on the grounds that it would introduce religious differences and possibly

quarrels in the public schools. This view was also taken by the Mizrachi Organization and the Histadrut Himorim.²⁹

However, the official Orthodox stand did not prevent some Orthodox rabbis from serving on an interdenominational commission on weekday religious released-time instruction, set up in May 1915. The commission, composed of Orthodox and Reform rabbis, Protestant ministers of many denominations, and Catholic priests, laid down guidelines for the program which stressed that religious liberty must not be infringed upon and no proselytizing should be done. Finally, the program was to remain voluntary and ultimate implementation was left to the individual religious bodies.³⁰

Many Reform rabbis opposed the plan despite the CCAR's endorsement. For example, Dr. Silverman, the rabbi of Temple Emanu-El of Manhattan, attacked the whole idea of released time. His opposition stemmed from the same fears that motivated the Orthodox Union to oppose the program. He noted:

The most insidious and criminal intention of the Gary system lies in its religious feature. The very fact that it proposes to give time and place in the school curriculum to religious education is a direct violation of our basic Constitutional laws. It matters not whether this instruction be given in the schools or whether pupils of various creeds at appointed hours assemble and march to churches outside. The evil effect is the same.

The evil he had in mind was the opening of the schools to religious fanaticism; he predicted that if the plan was adopted "the time will come when this country will be rent in twain by religious prejudice and strife."³¹

The tension in the Jewish and non-Jewish religious communities was reflected in a series of debates at the Free Synagogue in New York City. At one of these debates, Isadore Montefiore Levy, a member of the New York City Board of Education, spoke in opposition to the plan. Levy was the author of a resolution which would have prohibited the board from cooperating with churches in any way under the released-time program. Supporting Levy at the debate was a Protestant minister, Dr. William Milton Hess of Trinity Congregational Church, and a Reform rabbi, Clifton H. Levy of Tremont Temple. Rabbi Joel Blau of the Sixty-eighth Street Synagogue spoke on the other side, favoring released time.

Levy opposed the plan, believing it would open the flood-gates of sectarian hatred to which young people were particularly susceptible. He felt the program was in fact involuntary because of peer pressure on children. He predicted that the churches would not be able to fund the program and would eventually ask the local boards of education for financial aid. Finally, he believed the program would not be able to withstand a court test. Hess's arguments were similar.³²

Rabbi Blau disagreed strongly. For him, the key consideration was the fact that at least 200,000 Jewish children in New York were receiving no religious instruction whatsoever. Blau discounted the plan's dangers. He argued:

We say Americanism is in danger. I do not think Americanism is in danger, but I think Judaism is in danger. It seems to me the far greater danger comes from these untaught children than from religiously instructed children, whatever that religion may be. I have an ideal of Americanism which is conscious of the fact that there are racial differences and creedal differences but which is not afraid of them.³³

Isadore Montefiore Levy wrote up his opposition to the Gary plan in the form of a letter to the *New York Times*. Then Rabbi H. P. Mendes, of the Orthodox Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, who had been a participant in the interdenominational group which set the guidelines, wrote Levy urging him to give the plan a chance. Mendes made clear why he personally supported the plan, arguing that attending different religious schools on Sunday had not, as feared, introduced denominationalism into the public schools on Monday. Further he believed that Jews were not opposed to Bible and religion per se in the schools but only to sectarian interpretations of religion.

The Public School system cannot engage principals and teachers capable of presenting either without sectarian interpretation. Therefore we agree in the interest of peace, to banish both. Therefore, only morality resting on human experience, but not morality resting on Divine authority, is taught by men and women more or less fitted—and spirituality is not developed at all.

This pointed all the more to the need for the supplemental religious education. Mendes felt that the Gary plan would allow parents to expose children to spiritual instruction at an hour of the day when they could not help but absorb it.³⁴

The New York Kehillah, an umbrella organization representing a wide variety of Jewish organizations, both religious and secular, which ran a large number of afternoon schools, faced both philosophical and practical problems. The Kehillah firmly opposed the plan. Judah Magnes, its head, received many letters on the Gary plan, mostly in opposition. In the end the Kehillah rejected the plan both on philosophical grounds and because of the larger church-state issue.

However, the Kehillah's main reason for opposition was a practical one. It was impossible to hire teachers for the whole day, as would be required under the plan. The budget barely provided means for the late-afternoon Talmud Torah teachers, who supplemented their meager wages by full-time employment elsewhere, mostly as public school teachers. Since the Gary program would have resulted in students coming to religious schools at all hours of the school day, depending on their schedules, the burden on the religious schools would have been fiscally impossible. Thus the gains of a larger number of students participating and the chance to teach many of them earlier in the day when they would be more attentive were offset by practical fiscal realities. Despite attempts by Wirt, who came to New York as a consultant to the Board of Education, to accommodate the children's schedules to alleviate these problems, the Kehillah remained opposed.³⁵

More significant, because it was based on ideological grounds, was the opposition of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis. Its official position was not only opposed to Bible reading and released time but called for a complete separation of church and state in schools.

Conclusion

In summary, in the case of released time, as of Bible reading, we can see a fractured response by the Jewish community. On the one side accommodationists found released time an acceptable way for the public schools to foster religious instruction while abiding by the constitutional strictures of separation. Others in the Jewish community, rallying behind the call for a rigid separation of church and state, viewed released time as only another ploy to allow religion to inveigle its way into the public schools.

Both Bible reading and released time presented difficult issues for

the Jewish community in this period. Some believed that it was in the best interest of American Jewry to uphold strict separation of church and state, while others held that religious literacy was sadly lacking in the new generation. Religious education and role models in the home were the exception and not the rule. The Sunday school—or even the after-hours school—was not as effective an educational agent as the public school, which had both compulsory attendance and learning at peak hours of the day. Finally, to be attacking religion in the public schools placed the Jews in the awkward position of being in the same camp as atheists, socialists, anarchists, and communists. For many, the middle-road solution to this problem was Bible reading without comment and released time outside the public school's premises. This was seen as a way of holding on to the concept of the separation of church and state while at the same time allowing religious education to wend its way through the circuitous path of public education. The struggle for the soul remained a struggle not easily solved.

Joakim Isaacs is Professor of History at Marymount College, Tarrytown, New York. This article is a product of research conducted in the broader area of church-state relations.

Notes

1. Richard McMillan, *Religion in the Public Schools* (Mercer University Press, 1984), p. 302.
2. R. F. Butts, *Public Education in the United States* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978), p. 81.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
4. Robert Ulrich, "The School and Religion in the Historical Present," in *Foundation of American Education*, ed. J. A. Johnston et al. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1975), p. 239.
5. Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Dakota, South Dakota.
6. *Christian Statesman*, February 1901.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Arkansas, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia.
10. Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Wyoming.
11. California, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico.
12. Missouri, Minnesota, Montana, Washington, Wisconsin.

13. Portland (Oregon) *Jewish Tribune*, April 12, 1912.
14. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1914.
15. *American Israelite*, February 19, 1903.
16. *Why the Bible Should Not Be Read in the Public Schools* (Committee of Church and State, CCAR, 1916).
17. *CCAR Yearbook*, 1906.
18. *Ibid.*, 1909.
19. *American Israelite*, August 8, 1907.
20. *American Hebrew*, February 8, 1907.
21. *CCAR Yearbook*, 1916.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Lester Brunner, "The Gary Plan," *Religious Education* 10 (February 1915).
25. Tobias Schanfarber, "The Gary Plan," *Sentinel*, June 28, 1916.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Jewish Teacher* 1, no. 1 (1916). *Religious Education*, December 1915.
28. *CCAR Yearbook*, 1916.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Religious Education* 10 (December 1915). Magnes Papers, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, 13/1915.
31. *New York Times*, January 31, 1916.
32. Hess also participated in a debate at the Fordham Protestant Episcopal Church at which several hundred were in attendance. In the latter forum Hess stated his opposition to the plan, not on the high level of separation of church and state, but on the level of his own virulent anti-Catholicism. After claiming that 80 percent of the inmates at Sing-Sing prison were Catholic parochial school graduates, Hess claimed that the Gary plan would be an entering wedge to public financing of Catholic parochial schools. Moreover, he charged a Catholic teacher in Public School 44 with religious coercion of students. This led to a shouting match with the principal of the school, and the meeting erupted into what the *New York Times* picturesquely called "a verbal riot."
33. *CCAR Yearbook*, 1916.
34. *Jewish Tribune*, December 17, 1915. *New York Times*, November 28, 1915.
35. Magnes Papers, P3 1712.