

## The Social Gospel and Social welfare in Canada<sup>1</sup>

Richard Allen, the foremost Canadian writer on the Social Gospel, describes it as follows: "The Social Gospel rested on the premise that Christianity was a social religion, concerned, when the misunderstanding of the ages was stripped away, with the quality of human relations on this earth." It was a call to people to find the meaning of their lives in seeking to realize the Kingdom of God in the society itself, and the way in which society was, or ought to be, structured. Because the social gospel recognized that the problems of society required some approach which included all institutions and "institutional relationships" within society, it became involved in virtually all reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

While not necessarily an organized movement on its own, it was instead a broadly based religiously inspired movement which had an influence on social reform in Canada, as well as political activism, especially but not exclusively in Western Canada.

Allen describes the relationship between the social gospel and social problems as they existed at the time in Canadian society.

...as the social problems of a growing industrial urban society multiplied and as new currents of social thought developed, the urgency of evangelical concern to save this man now, should have been transferred to the social sphere and social action become virtually a religious rite. Nor is it astonishing.....that the social gospel represented Canada in mid-passage from a society that was jealous of the status of its churches to one that comfortably wore the habiliments of secularism. The social gospel's heavy emphasis on the immanence of divinity in the social process...encouraged the development of a secular society, and at the same time imparted...a sense of meaning to that development that was essentially religious.(p. 356)

However, it should be recognized that the Social Gospel was neither a unitary movement, nor something which enjoyed universal support among the Christian churches of the day. The Protestant religions (Anglican, Methodism & Presbyterian) of the late 19th c. English Canada were largely opposed to the concepts of social action. Their strong opposition to Labour and social change as evidenced in the report of the *Christian Guardian* of June 1887 (quoted by Allen)

"We have no faith in the abolition of poverty by any laws that can be made in legislatures ...The best anti-poverty society is an association of men who would adopt as their governing principles in life, industry, sobriety, economy, and intelligence."

---

<sup>1</sup>Much of what follows is based on the work of Richard Allen. See for example Allen, R. *The Social Passion* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1971; Allen, R. "The Social Gospel and The Reform Tradition in Canada, 1890-1928" in Clark, S.D., Grayson, J.P, and Grayson, L.M. (eds) *Prophecy and Protest: Social Movements in Twentieth-Century Canada* Toronto: Gage Publishing 1975 and Allen, R. "The Background of the Social Gospel in Canada" in *The Social Gospel in Canada: Papers of the Interdisciplinary Conference on the Social Gospel* Ottawa: National Museums of Canada. 1975. All quotations in this section are from *The Social Passion*.

This was not a rejection of the problems of society, but rather a faith that the solutions to social problems rested with individual redemption, as the causes of social problems were to be found in these individuals.

Allen notes a number of factors involved in the development of the social gospel.

1. The revivalist emphasis on the need and possibility for a radical change in life. This was a part of the revivalist movement which existed across North America promoting the idea that a radical change in life was necessary/possible; The shift away from this notion, "individual redemption" and the Calvinist-based theology emerged through the rise of evangelicalism.

"Evangelicalism" stressed free will, an immanent God, religious emotion, and a restrictive personal & social morality. It also believed in the possibility of personal perfection beyond the temptation of sin. Its individualism gradually faded in the face a strong recognition of social problems inherent in society, resulting in a change from "save this person, now" to "save this society, now!";

2. an evangelical theology of the immanence of God in the processes of change;
3. a belief that the application of Christian energy could arouse social repentance and the will to new life;
4. the establishment or revitalising of a host of new religious organizations creating a cradle to grave Protestantism coincident with the churches' adoption of a broader culture-building role and a sense of national mission; (Institutions like the YMCA and WCTU came to the fore or were re-launched)
5. the development of more hopeful view of childhood opening new possibilities for secular social reform;
6. evolution called for new patterns of co-operative living;
7. the feeling that the worship of God required not burnt offerings but justice for the people;
8. and beginnings of a new appreciation of the positive uses of the state.

The response of the social gospel to social problems

Slums and immigration were identified as the major problems of the day the response to these was essentially to borrow the American/British approach of the settlement house. An alliance of church and labour had pushed for and won "The Lord's Day Act" and became, in 1907, the Moral and Social Reform Council of Canada headed jointly by the Methodist and Presbyterian social service secretaries. In 1913 it became the Social Service Council of Canada and in 1914, it convened a national congress [The Social Service Congress] in Ottawa to discuss national social issues. It was a collection of social workers, judges, lawyers, labour leaders, etc. all working outside the centres of power, all in one

form or another a part of or influenced by the social gospel. Some of the topics at the Congress included weekly rest day, the Canadian Indian, church & industrial life, child welfare, social service as a life work, prison reform, temperance, immigration, etc.

Allen identifies three different strands of the social gospel in the years leading up to the start of the First World War. The first he describes as a conservative element. It was closest to traditional evangelicalism, in its emphasis on personal ethical issues, in its identification as sin being an individual as opposed to a social act, and in taking as a social strategy the legislative reform of the social environment, through such things as laws restricting the sale of alcohol and preserving Sunday as a religious day. The second was something he termed a "radical" view which saw society in more organic terms. Thus the evils in society had an impact on everyone, and therefore everyone should be working toward the elimination of evil from society. Lastly, there was a progressive view which tried to take from both sides while retaining a broad centre approach.

### The First World War and its Impact on the Social Gospel

The First World War and complexities related to it split the social gospel. William Irvine, a Presbyterian, and Woodsworth, Ivens, & Bland, all Methodists, each lost their positions largely over differences in terms of pacifism and the fear that the rich, including some organized churches, were making money from the War. Although the radicals were in the midst of the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919 [and it launched the political careers of some of them like J.S. Woodsworth], not all elements of the social gospel were as staunchly supportive.

Allen suggests that the social gospel had become, during the early years of the 20th c., the "religion of the agrarian revolt." Hence the fracturing and decline of agrarian protest had an impact on the social gospel, particularly in the form of the wearing out, at least temporarily, of social ideals in the late 1920's and the change in direction (to institutional building) brought on by Church Union of the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists in 1925.

Allen offers the following assessment of the Social Gospel. In doing so, he provides us with a strong opinion of the role the social gospel played in the development of the welfare state:

It would be too much to say that the it [the Social Gospel] won any of the churches fully to its concept of social reality or its interpretation of the social implications of the gospel. Yet after 1914 no major church could ignore its force in the formulation of social policy. Whether accepted by the churches or not, it underscored the need for an adequate social ethic for the new Canada. In this respect, it brought a broad range of social reforms w/in the sanctions of Canadian Protestantism, and in so doing was probably the medium by which the multitude of social programmes making up the Canadian welfare state first found their way into the main channels of Canadian social attitudes (p.352)

### The Reform Era, the Great War, and the 1920's

## Child Welfare

Early Provision of Services were provided by orphanages, foster homes and adoption. The first of these was by far the most common. Early orphanages were established in Canada. Institutions in England like the charity school, workhouse and orphanages were the roots of the Canadian examples. There were two important points about this period. Initially, children were not separated from adults (borrowing from the mixed workhouse concept from Britain). Secondly, it was common to have half-orphans in these institutions where relatives or parents paid fees for their care. Later developments were related to the growing recognition of children as a special class led to the creation of separate and special orphanages for children. Orphanages in Canada were never as large as those in England-size ranged from 20 or more to several hundred but most were smaller. The first orphanage in the West was Children's Home of Winnipeg founded in 1885-by the Christian Women's Union.

Two other methods of substitute child care were common. The most prominent was that of apprenticeship and this was the primary method of dealing with orphans and abandoned children. The other method was adoption. This generally occurred without a firm legal framework but institutions would place a child with a family and turn over guardianship responsibility to them. During this early period adoption was quite an informal process.

Ontario legislation is generally seen as the forerunner of most Canadian child welfare legislation. The first legislation was the Children's Protection Act passed in 1888. Foster homes developed and emerged as an alternative to institutions or orphanages, the neglect or exploitation of children became punishable and the voluntary, charity model became the key. The first Children's Aid Society was established in Toronto in 1891. These societies were generally provided statutory authority and limited funds. The elite in the community-provided most funding through donations and legitimacy to service. The middle class provided human resources (voluntarily), and professionals played minor staff roles.

One good example of the development of a child welfare system is that of our own system here in Manitoba<sup>2</sup>. The early history of the Province indicates that where there was some organised attempt to deal with 'needy' children, it was done in sectarian institutions. The first of these was a home for dependent children and the aged, established in St. Boniface in 1884 by the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns). In 1885, the Christian Women's Union (a Protestant women's organisation made up of wives of clergy and businessmen) established the Children's Home of Winnipeg. It admitted boys under 16 and girls under 14 considered destitute. The first significant piece of legislation was entitled the Humane Societies Act of 1895 and it reflected a new approach coming from Ontario. The act was designed to prevent "cruelty to animals and the ill-usage of

---

<sup>2</sup>The section on developments in Manitoba is based in part on an unpublished paper by Denise Fuchs entitled "Child Welfare in Manitoba: 1898-1928." All quotes contained in the discussion on child welfare in Manitoba are from this paper.

men, women, and children." In 1898 the Manitoba Government and the Humane Society invited J.J. Kelso (who was a founder and organizer of The Toronto Humane Society and the CAS of Toronto, as well as having been instrumental in the passage of the Juvenile Delinquency Act; and was Superintendent of Neglected Children in Ontario from 1893 to 1934.) to come and advise them on setting up more formal procedures for dealing with dependent and neglected children.

The result of Kelso's visit was the Child Protection Act of 1898 [Act for the Better Protection of Neglected and Dependent Children]. The act established the fact that the province was expected to intervene on behalf of its children. This is significant in that it provides legislative backing for the emerging philosophy that the state must intervene in certain circumstances.

The Act established several definitions of neglected and dependent children:

A neglected child was one who was (1) found begging in any street, house or place of public resort; (2) found wandering about at an hour or sleeping at night in barns, outhouses or open air; (3) found associating or dwelling with a thief, drunkard or vagrant or who by reason of neglect or drunkenness, or other vices of the parents or guardians is suffered to grow up w/out salutary parental control and education, or in circumstances exposing such a child to idle and dissolute life; (4) found in any disorderly house or in company of reputed criminal, immoral or disorderly people; (5) a destitute orphan or who as been deserted by his lawful parents or guardians; (6) found guilty of petty crimes and who is likely to develop criminal tendencies if not removed from his or her surroundings.( Quoted by Fuchs, p. 6)

The act also forbade the placement of any child in the company of adults in a gaol, and called for the appointment of an officer called the Superintendent of Neglected Children who had responsibility for child protection, placement, inspection of placements, and record-keeping of all committals.

Children's Aid Societies soon appeared, to implement the Act. CAS of Winnipeg was established in 1898 as a Protestant, urban-based organization with board members from the leading reform-minded citizenry.

The CAS of St. Adelard was established in 1905 to prevent Catholic (and French-speaking) children from being placed in Protestant homes in Winnipeg. Other CAS's were est. afterward: Dauphin in 1914, Brandon in 1916 (one set up in 1898 hadn't lasted); and The Jewish Children's Home and Aid Society in Winnipeg in 1919. A subsequent piece of legislation, the Child Welfare Act of 1922, was a later consolidation of several statutes dealing with Child Welfare issues.

### Juvenile Delinquency and The Juvenile Delinquents Act of 1908<sup>3</sup>

Note: Coulter's article in Blake and Keshen gives a good account of the developments of legislation and attitudes towards juvenile delinquents in

---

<sup>3</sup>for more detailed information on the Juvenile Delinquents Act see Leon, J. "The development of Canadian Juvenile Justice: A Background for Reform" *Osgood Law Journal* 15(1). 1977

Alberta during this time period. Be sure to read it in conjunction with this section.

Similarly as with many social issues of the day, the root of the problem of juvenile delinquency was the urban slum. More specifically, the problem of the immigrant family, and children, in the urban slum was seen as at the base of juvenile delinquency in urban Canada in the last years of the 19th century.

Despite the consensus as to cause, there wasn't a consensus as to cure.

-manifestations of behaviour, i.e. conduct, were considered to be inextricably intertwined with character. Vagrancy, disorderly conduct and intoxication were clear signs of problems not only of behaviour, but of the character of the young person. The school was a natural place to begin to augment what must come first from the family: proper discipline and training. It was also recognized, however that in the absence of proper family support, the school was not enough. The early, Upper Canada experience therefore relied heavily on institutions. Several legislative Acts of the colony of Upper Canada in the 1850's had led to the establishment of institutions to deal with young male offenders. By 1874, the (now) provincial legislature passed an Act Respecting Industrial Schools for the Province of Ontario which established residential schools to which police magistrates could commit children under 14 for teaching and training up to their 16th birthday.

The reformers of the day, including Kelso mentioned above in the discussion on child welfare, sought to reduce the use of institutions for young people and instead argued for the Use of probation and development of a separate juvenile court. Their efforts culminated in important changes with respect to judicial processes for young people, leading to the passage of the Juvenile Delinquents Act (JDA) in 1908. Some of the changes leading up to the JDA included things like the Ontario Child Protection Act of 1893 stating that charges for young persons (under 12 for a boy and 13 for a girl) will result in notification of a local CAS and submission of a report to the court and a Federal Act of 1894 which mandated a separate trial for a young person under the age of 16 and without publicity, and provided for children under 14 to be sent home, into CAS custody, or to an industrial school as alternatives to prison. In Winnipeg, in anticipation of the JDA, the Province of Manitoba opened in Winnipeg a Juvenile Detention Home operated by the Salvation Army, and also opened the Portage Industrial School for Boys in the same year. This was followed in 1909, by the establishment of a juvenile court and appointed the Superintendent of Neglected Children as the Chief Probation Officer as well.

The Juvenile Delinquents Act attempted to counterbalance the demands of the justice system with a child welfare approach in dealing with young people. Thus, courts were established and certain rules of criminal procedure applied. However, disposition called for assessment and intervention instead of punishment. The act created the single offence of being found delinquent. Thus both criminal matters and non-criminal child welfare matters could be included in the finding, and subsequent disposition. The problem here is, again, constitutional. The federal government could not become involved in welfare issues. But the idea was to have a federal, criminal statute, the JDA, handle child

welfare issues. Thus, the finding of “being delinquent” as a result of conviction of any criminal code offence, as well as any provincial statute (i.e. alcohol, neglect, etc.)