the sunday school as popular culture

robert h. canary

From Edwards to Neibuhr and Tillich, religious thought in America has formed a distinguished if not always effective part of our High Culture. The history of religion in America is usually, and no doubt properly, approached through this body of thought, through the biographies of leading ministers and through the social histories of our denominations and sects. But the student of our culture might well consider directing some of his attention to the currently rather specialized field of Christian Education. The literature of the American Sunday school movement is to the works of our great theologians as the dime novel is to the works of Hawthorne and Melville; like the dime novel, the Sunday school paper lacks profundity but may claim a certain representativeness. Two areas of investigation seem especially promising: the American Sunday school as a vehicle for the professed ideals of society, and the history of the Sunday school movement as an example of the effects of institutionalization and centralization on American popular culture.

In the twentieth century, at least, middle class American parents who have drifted away from organized religion are most apt to return to the church at the time their children are eligible for Sunday school.[1] In America's flourishing suburbs, the quality of the Sunday school program has become a real factor in the choice of church attended. Even parents professedly non-religious themselves may deliver their children to the Sunday school. While for some parents the Sunday school may function primarily as a weekend baby-sitter, the importance attached to it seems to indicate a widespread desire to expose children to the training provided in the Sunday school. The Sunday school may have changed since the days of Tom Sawyer, and the movement may have lost much of its vitality, but the respectable boys of today are still bundled off on Sunday morning, perhaps still envying some lower-class Huck.

It is hard to pin down just what the parents expect of the Sunday

school today; it is, in fact, a familiar complaint in the professional literature directed toward Sunday school teachers and superintendents that many parents show relatively little interest in the details of the curriculum and even less interest in becoming personally involved. Because almost all of the existing literature on the Sunday school has been written by men professionally involved in religious education, it tells us more about their own hopes and expectations than about society's. Objective research is called for on parental expectations and on the even more difficult question of the Sunday school's actual effects. Such research should benefit from the methodological advances being made in recent efforts to study weekday parochial education.[2] At present, it seems the most one can claim is that the Sunday school is a place where our White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture tries to articulate its ideology. In the materials and professional literature one finds this expressed in three

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obvious concerns: inculcating certain essential dogmas, providing an acquaintance with the religious tradition (Bible stories and the like) and building "Christian character."

A single lesson may obviously serve more than one of these ends, and publishers customarily declare that their lesson series serve all three. Nevertheless one may make certain generalized distinctions by age of child and theological stance of the presumed buyer. Stories from the Bible and church history seem relatively more prominent in the earliest years of many programs; concern with credal affirmations is most intense at the period when membership decisions are expected; emphasis on "Christian living" seems especially prominent in literature aimed at teenagers. This pattern suggests that the Sunday school as an institution is one instrument for the socialization of the child. Stories from the Bible are a part of his basic cultural heritage. Stories from the history of the church call his attention to the special cultural tradition that is his as a Protestant—or more specifically, as a Baptist, a Methodist or whatever. The point at which one joins a specific church is the natural point at which to absorb its special definition of the Christian creed. And as teenagers are on the verge of becoming full-fledged members of adult society, it is natural that the Sunday school should be used to convey society's most ideal expectations.

At all levels literature for use in theologically conservative churches is more concerned with credal statements and proportionately less concerned with Christian ethics than is literature produced for theologically

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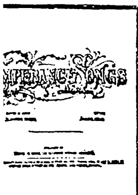

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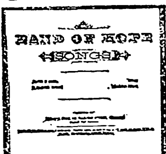

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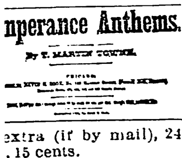

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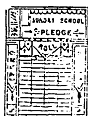

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Excerpts from the David C. Cook Company supply catalog of the 1890's give evidence to the importance of temperance crusading in the morality of the early Sunday school.

liberal churches. The large mainstream denominations are also relatively "liberal," and the literature they use reflects a special concern for the Christian's moral problems in everyday life. One may explain this difference by saying that the more conservative churches in America are apt to be further toward the "sect" end of the sect-church continuum, and that their literature reflects their frequently other-worldly character. If such a statement seems overly value-laden, one may balance it by observing that, in its accommodation to the "world," mainstream Protestantism is America's closest approach to a religious establishment, that its theology is thought by many of its own leaders to be dangerously close to culture-religion and that it is therefore not surprising that it should often purvey the best values of a more or less Christian culture rather than the potentially radical values of Christianity itself.[3]

Whatever their source, values as well as beliefs are passed along to the younger generation in their Sunday school paper. The historian will not find in this literature an accurate guide to the social realities of America, but he may find it a valuable source on the social ideals of America. These are not the ideals of philosophers and theologians but the ideals of those lay churchmen who believe what they are taught to believe or that portion of it which it is not inconvenient to believe, the ideals of the pious official moralists of the time, Sunday school workers and rural pastors. Other types of popular literature pay lip service to these ideals while concentrating on less pious but equally permanent attractions—power, sex, success and violence. Sunday school literature complements this by showing, so far as is decorous, that earthly goals are best achieved by obeying heavenly precepts. Preliminary research indicates what one might well expect, that the official morality of America has not changed much in the course of a hundred years or so. One important exception would be temperance, once a virtually inseparable part of Sunday school morality, now downplayed in much of the literature. More tentatively one may speak of a change in the rewards held out for living the Christian life; where once material success was unashamedly attributed to total abstinence and regular church attendance, now even the successful businessman or athlete is apt to be quoted as having found personal happiness through religion. This may reflect a general American shift from wealth as a goal in itself to security, a goal known as "peace of mind" in Sunday school weeklies.

While any historian may find some useful illustrative material in this literature, it would be especially useful to have portions of the literature subjected to a historically-oriented content analysis; a possible model would be Schneider and Dornbusch's *Popular Religion, Inspirational Books in America* (Chicago, 1958). Although denominational publishing houses dominate the field, independent religious publishers may be of special interest to the researcher. Their position is a piquant one; like the president of a private college, the independent religious publisher

must both serve the highest of ends and balance the books, thus facing in a radical form the problems and temptations of a moral man in a capitalist economy. More importantly, the literature he produces must reflect the views of the churches which adopt it. A denominational publishing house has the authority of the sponsoring denomination behind it; its adoption is frequently automatic.[4] Given the impersonal and relatively undemocratic structure of most American denominations, there is little effective local control of curriculum planning. The literature may, for example, represent the theologically and socially more liberal views of a highly educated urban clergy. The independent publishing house may hope to sell to churches which reject their denomination's views, to smaller groups without their own publishing house and to independent community churches. It can never expect automatic adoption and hence is more likely to be representative, whatever its theological coloration.[5] Nor need its influence be insignificant, even if the relative share of the market taken by independent houses is declining. One such firm, the David C. Cook Publishing Co., claims to serve some fifty thousand churches and to reach up to five million individuals with its literature; its largest seller, *Sunday Pix,* a comic-book style Sunday school weekly, has a claimed circulation of eight hundred thousand.

The David C. Cook Company, in a recent catalog, advertizes *The Sunday Pix,* a comic book style weekly, as one of the most popular and widely read Sunday school papers. It contains Bible stories, tales about missionaries and articles on Christian life and vocation.

Denominational domination of the market for Sunday school literature is a relatively recent phenomenon, part of the process by which an originally lay movement has been taken over by the institutionalized church. The history of this process has yet to receive adequate treatment as a chapter in the institutionalizing of American religion.[6] The first true Sunday school was founded in England in 1780 by a layman, Robert Raikes. Although the Methodists in particular were quick to incorporate Sunday schools into their system, America's chief followers of Raikes's example were to be laymen. The first American Sunday school Association was founded in Philadelphia in 1790. The leadership was predominantly lay, although Episcopalian Bishop White was its first President. The school was not tied to ony one denomination—a Universalist, a Roman Catholic and two Quakers were included among the founders. As local societies proliferated, city-wide unions were organized; these joined forces in the American Sunday School Union in 1824. The unit of organization was the neighborhood school, the governing board was to be kept entirely lay and special care was taken that no one denomination dominate the committee on publications.

The success of the Union roused some denominations to opposition and various publishing houses to imitation. A period of confusion ended with the coming of national conventions. These put themselves on a more permanent basis when the National Convention of 1869 appointed an interim committee to plan a convention in Indianapolis for 1872. The 1872 convention took two important steps: it appointed a staff statistician, and it appointed an International Lesson Committee. The latter action was urged upon the convention by B. F. Jacobs, a Chicago realtor and one of the most important figures in the American movement for the next twenty years. Committed to community organized, nondenominational Sunday schools, Jacobs had already forced a tentative agreement upon the leading denominational and independent publishers of lesson plans. The outcome of his efforts before and after the convention was the International Uniform Lesson Series, uniform both in that large number of schools used its selection of Bible texts and lesson titles and in that all classes in a given school used the same text.[7]

The triennial conventions were theoretically separate entities, but more and more permanent organization was developed. A permanent Executive Committee was created in 1881, with Jacobs as its chairman until his death in 1902. Marion Lawrence was elected General Secretary in 1899 and continued to function as executive secretary when the convention system became the International Sunday School Association in 1907.[8] The new Association was dedicated to a more vigorous expansion of the Sunday school movement, but its plans and the indiscreet statements of some of its leaders provoked the leaders of the major denominations to seek to bring the Sunday schools attended by their members and

associated with their churches more directly under their control. The heads of their reinvigorated educational staffs met in 1910 and by 1912 organized the Sunday School Council of Evangelical Denominations. By 1914 the professional leadership of the denominations gained representation on the International Lesson Committee.

The denominations were important in persuading the Lesson Committee to issue a Graded Lesson Series (different Bible texts for each age group) alongside the old Uniform Series, but this issue, although important to Sunday school publishers and workers, was a mere symbolic token in the unacknowledged power struggle between the lay International Association and the denominational Council. The outcome of such a conflict was inevitable. The Association was made up of volunteer businessmen and a few informally trained staff workers; the denominational Council could call upon a group of well-trained, well-paid workers. The Association was chronically short of cash; the Council drew its funds from the denominations. Finally, the Council could count on the denominational loyalties of most church members.

In 1922, the two bodies merged to form the International Council of Religious Education (first called the International Sunday-school Council of Religious Education). Hugh S. Magill, a former field secretary for the National Education Association, was brought in to serve as a nonpartisan General Secretary.[9] The new group was to be balanced between territorial and denominational representatives, but it was soon dominated by the denominational representatives; territorial delegates were naturally members of one denomination or another, and denominational field workers were more efficient. This was one of the eight agencies joining to form the National Council of Churches in 1950. In effect, it became the National Council's Division of Christian Education, which like the National Council itself is an instrument of denominational cooperation with no independent base.[10] Strains continue within the local churches, but the independent Sunday school movement is for all practical purposes dead.[11]

The brief sketch just given of the history of the American Sunday school movement may prompt some to lament yet another instance of a movement stressing "participatory democracy" passing into the hands of remote "experts."[12] But it should be noted that the tendencies in American religion which made the denominational take-over inevitable were already at work within the lay controlled Association: From an amorphous movement of independent Sunday school unions, it had developed into a permanent national body producing a Uniform Series of lesson texts. It had the beginnings of a professional staff, and decisions were made by a more or less permanent group of leaders. Institutionalization, professionalization, centralization—these processes seem to go with mass movements in a mass society. The brotherly conflict between the Asso-

ciation and the Council was between two institutions. If the denominations won, it was partly because forces operating on both groups also pushed the local Sunday schools into closer and closer association with the churches and the clergy.

The American Sunday school is an institution of some importance whose nature and history may help us to understand some of the values and processes which operate throughout our culture and make possible an integrated study of it. Most of the material cited in the notes to this essay has been produced by individuals active in religious education, and their studies reflect the parochial concerns of the movement's professionals. They are the logical starting points for any investigation, but they do not ask of their material the kind of questions likely to interest the general student of American culture, and their objectivity and reliability is sometimes open to question. The same difficulty arises in using other secondary materials one needs to consult if considering research in this area—periodicals, books and texts aimed at Sunday school teachers and leaders.[13] Studies of the values conveyed by Sunday school literature must examine the material itself; secondary descriptions, the source of existing studies, are not an adequate substitute. Those concerned with the history of the movement must seek out the papers and archives of Sunday school leaders, organizations and publishing houses.

On the basis of some limited research of the sort required, this essay has suggested some possible directions more systematic study might take. If such study is to produce results of general significance, it must relate the Sunday school to American culture as a whole. The most immediate need is for small scale studies: sociological studies of the Sunday school as it operates in particular communities, literary analyses of the latent content of various Sunday school curricula and historical accounts of local, regional and national organizations and of denomination and independent publishig houses. Especially since almost every area of the country offers many opportunities for fresh work in this vein, graduate students in American Studies and allied disciplines might well consider theses and dissertations on the Sunday school. Ideally, a number of such particular studies would permit more firmly grounded generalizations about the place of the Sunday school in American culture.

University of Hawaii

footnotes

1. Dennison Nash and Peter Berger, "The Child, the Family, and the 'Religious Revival' in Suburbia," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* II (1962), 85-93. The authors see their findings as confirmation of William H. Whyte, Jr.'s emphasis on the importance of the Sunday school in church selection in *The Organization Man* (New York, 1956), 379-80.

2. Especially Andrew M. Greeley and Peter H. Rossi, *The Education of Catholic Americans* (Chicago, 1966).

3. Like educational progressivism and theological liberalism, the "experience-centered" curriculum is a twentieth-century phenomenon and one no longer at its peak of popularity. For studies of changing curricula, see Marvin J. Taylor, "Changing Conceptions of the Role of the Bible in American Protestant Religious Education, 1903 to 1953," unpubl. diss. (Pitts-

burgh, 1954), and Frank G. Lankard, *A History of the American Sunday-School Curriculum* (New York, 1927). Most of the historical chapters of J. Donald Butler's *Religious Education* (New York, 1962) deal with Christian educational theory; he also has a brief chapter on "The Rise of the Sunday School" (53-67).

4. Butler's text, *Religious Education,* for example, argues for denominational control of materials (267-68) and sees non-denominational materials as potentially "divisive" (270, 277).

5. The likelihood that rural and small town churches of the theologically "liberal" denominations will not be "liberal" themselves is one of the methodological questions raised in Benton Johnson and Richard H. White, "Protestantism, Political Preference, and the Nature of Religious Influence: Comment on Anderson's Paper," *Review of Religious Research,* IX: 1 (Fall, 1967), 28-35.

6. In fact, the Sunday school receives little mention in such standard surveys as Jerald C. Brauer, *Protestantism in America* (Philadelphia, 1965); Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York, 1965); and W. W. Sweet, *Story of Religion in America,* rev. (New York, 1950). Among the special surveys of the movement are: Arlo A. Brown, *A History of Religious Education in Recent Times* (New York, 1923); Marianna C. Brown, *Sunday-School Movements in America* (New York, 1901), done as a Columbia dissertation; E. Wilbur Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement, 1780-1917, and the American Sunday School Union, 1817-1917* (Philadelphia, 1917); and E. Morris Fergusson, *Historic Chapters in Christian Education in America* (New York, 1935). These form the basis for the sketch which follows.

7. John R. Sampey, *The International Lesson Series* (New York, 1911) is tedious but gives detailed background.

8. Harold G. Lawrence, *Marion Lawrence* (New York, 1925) is a useful, though largely uncritical biography.

9. Roy G. Ross, "Hugh S. Magill, 1868-1958," *International Journal of Religious Education,* XXXV: 4 (December, 1958), 17.

10. This characteristic of the NCC has led Peter Berger to propose an economic analogy, quite possibly as valid as the socio-political analysis of this essay—"A Market Model for the Analysis of Ecumenicity," *Social Research,* XXX (1963), 77-94, sees the NCC as a kind of cartel designed to reduce the rigors of competition among its middle class oriented member denominations. At the local level, the so-called rivalry of church and church school also seems to make the economic assumption that the members' time and enthusiasm available for religious activities is fixed; in its own interests, the church must attempt to control its allocation.

11. For an unusually frank discussion of local stresses, see Nevin C. Harner, *The Educational Work of the Church* (New York, 1939), 57-60. Note the appeal to the ideal of a centralized, institutionalized church in Harner's call for "a clear subordination of the auxiliaries to the church proper" (59).

12. Religious education *has* become a profession, with advanced training and degrees open to both laymen and clergy. For a sign of the times, one might look to the discussion of the religious education director as a "process specialist in problem solving" in Gordon L. Lippitt, "Emerging Roles of the Religious Education Director," *Internatonal Journal of Religious Education,* XLIV: 5 (January, 1968), 5-7, 26. One is rather relieved to find next to this an article of a sort found annually in such leadership periodicals, Martha Jones, "Vacation Church School Ahead!" (same issue, 8-9).

13. Among the leadership publications, the *International Journal of Religious Education* is now the official publication of the NCC's Division of Christian Education; it covers major changes in denominational curricula and reviews books in the field, so it is of special utility. The Cook Co.'s equivalent is called *Sunday-School Leader,* and other denominational and independent houses publish leadership periodicals, often combining them with teachers' guides. A recent book of special interest is the report of a sixteen-denomination cooperative project, *The Church's Educational Ministry, a Curriculum Plan* (St. Louis, 1965). Virgil E. Foster was for sixteen years an *IJRE* editor, so his textbook (with Eleanor Shelton Morrison), *Creative Teaching in the Church* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), may have special representative value. For further bibliography one should consult the standard indexes, the files of the *IJRE,* and of course *Religion in American Life,* eds. J. W. Smith and A. L. Jamison, Vol. IV: *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America,* ed. Nelson R. Burr (Princeton, 1961), esp. IV: 1, 434-42.