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## DO GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS? JEWS AND JUDAISM IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES


Michael Brown


**The Prewar Era / A Challenge to the System Restores the Status Quo Ante / Universities in the Early Years / The Postwar Era / Paradoxes and Their Resolution**

The "high wall of separation" which divides state from religion in the United States is often touted as one of the most important devices ensuring the proper functioning of American democracy. Like the neighbor in Robert Frost's poem, "The Mending Wall," Americans believe that "good fences make good neighbors," that the wall of separation is the guarantor of civil relations among the country's diverse groups. Since World War II, Americans have gone to considerable lengths to keep the wall high, to maintain strict separation between the realms of God and caesar, especially with regard to education.

The melting-pot ethos of America made the public school into the flagship institution of the immigrant society, its main Americanizing agency. Parochial schools, whether ethnic or religious, were widely held to have about them a decidedly un-American aroma, unless WASP and disguised by a veneer of wealth and privilege. In recent decades, some Jews — especially the Orthodox who maintain a network of parochial schools and would like their tax dollars to pay for them — have questioned the wisdom of rigid separation. Most Jews, however, have argued that keeping religion out of the American public square, especially the public schools, benefits them as individuals, and as a community.

In Canada, no wall was ever erected to segregate religion from state, nor have most Canadians thought one necessary. Ethnically, linguistically, and religiously, French Canada was almost homogeneous until quite recently. Roman Catholicism was the unofficially established religion, and the melting pot was not an ideal. English Canada was more diverse, but much less so than the United States. Before World War II, its melting pot was meant to mold British provincials; Protestant values and sensibilities, if not beliefs, were part of that construct.

For close to two centuries, Canadian Jews were considerably disadvantaged in the area of education and in other areas of life as well. Since the 1960s, however, their successes as a group and as individuals have been the envy of coreligionists everywhere, even the United States. Ironically, the


DANIEL J. ELAZAR, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER; ZVI R. MAROM, ASSOCIATE EDITOR; MARK AMI-EL, MANAGING EDITOR. 13 TEL-HAI ST., JERUSALEM, ISRAEL; TEL. 972-2-5619281, FAX. 972-2-5619112, INTERNET: ELAZAR@VMS.HUJI.AC.IL. IN U.S.A.: 1616 WALNUT ST., SUITE 507, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19103; TEL. (215) 204-1459, FAX. (215) 204-7784.


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cause of religion, in general, especially mainstream Christianity, was probably better served in the earlier years and is less well served today. The effect of the lack of separation between church and state on these developments is the subject of this essay.

**The Prewar Era**

Even before confederation in 1867, Canada was, in effect, a bi-national, bi-cultural, bi-lingual, and bi-religious federation. In origin, Canadians were either French, which meant French-speaking and Roman Catholic, or British, which meant English-speaking and Protestant. (Some Anglo-Canadians were Irish Catholics.) Already by 1841, the dissentient minorities (that is, Protestants in Lower Canada or Quebec and Catholics in Upper Canada or Ontario) had the right to establish their own tax-supported schools. The schools of the dominant faith were considered "public"; those of the minority faith were the legally recognized, publicly supported "separate" schools. In Quebec, denominational schooling is only now coming to an end, as a result of legislation passed within the last year to reorganize the province's schools along linguistic lines. (In Newfoundland, which joined the Canadian confederation in 1949, schools have been run on an equal basis by the various denominations until now. In theory, Jews might have established their own government-funded schools, as did other religious groups wherever numbers justified. No locality in Newfoundland has ever had enough Jewish children to warrant a school, however, and now denominational schooling has been legislated out of existence there, too.)

For Jews, the shortcomings of this confessional structure were most obvious in Quebec. The Quebec Education Act of 1861 provided for Protestant and Roman Catholic schools in both Montreal and Quebec City. In 1869, the province made a further refinement. In Montreal, the population was divided into four groups for school tax purposes: a Roman Catholic panel, a Protestant panel, a neutral panel consisting of corporations and individuals who were neither Protestant nor Catholic, and a tax-exempt panel. Taxes paid into the first two panels supported the respective denominational schools. Taxes paid into the neutral panel were divided between Protestants and Roman Catholics on a per capita basis. In the cities of Montreal and Quebec, parents could choose the school system in which they wished to enroll their children but not the system to which they paid their taxes.

The various school acts enshrined a system in which there was no legal place for Jews (or other non-Christians), who constituted a negligible minority in mid-nineteenth-century Canada. During the first hundred years or so of Jewish life in British North America, Jewish children found their way into Protestant schools. A few attended Catholic or private schools.

By 1870, the number of Jews in Montreal invited codification of their status in the schools. A new education act that year gave Montreal and Quebec City Jews the right to pay their taxes into either the Protestant or the Roman Catholic panel and to educate their children in either system. As earlier, most Jewish parents chose the Protestant system.

In 1886, however, a split occurred in the Jewish community. The Spanish and Portuguese congregation, which included most of the city's wealthy Jews, affiliated its school with the Catholic Board, causing considerable animosity between Jews and Protestants and among Jews themselves. Most direct Jewish tax payments were now being channeled into the Roman Catholic system, while most Jewish children attended Protestant schools, seemingly at the expense of Protestants. (The latter chose to ignore the fact that indirectly Jews were bearing their share of school expenses through the rents they paid.) Agitation within the Jewish community mounted when the Baron de Hirsch School for immigrant Jewish children was opened in 1890. That school was affiliated with the Protestant Board and supported mostly by Jewish communal funds to which the patrician members of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue contributed little. Graduates of the Hirsch school continued their education in the Protestant system like most other Jewish children, allegedly placing upon it an added burden.

Eventually, but only after provincial government intervention, a compromise was effected. The Spanish and Portuguese congregation closed its poorly attended school. The Protestant Board was now to receive all Jewish taxes; in return, it would subsidize the Baron de Hirsch School and hire Rabbi Meldola De Sola of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue as a teacher.

Jews continued to be second-class citizens under the new agreement, and Protestants remained unhappy. Jews could not be elected to school boards nor vote in elections; they were not hired as supervisory personnel nor even as teachers. Whenever possible, Jewish children were segregated in all-Jewish schools or, at least, in all-Jewish classes. In 1902, they were denied the right to earn high school scholarships. Protestants complained about the cost of educating Jewish children, and the challenge to the Christian character of the

schools posed by a Jewish presence was irksome, especially for those with anti-Semitic attitudes.

**A Challenge to the System Restores the Status Quo Ante**

In 1903, suit was brought against the Montreal Protestant School Board on behalf of a Jewish boy whose grades would have earned him a high school scholarship had he been Protestant. The case was lost, because Jews were deemed to be without legal rights in Quebec schools. The consequent uproar resulted in a new school law, which declared Jews "Protestants for school purposes." It was an inelegant compromise. Jewish children were now to attend school by right; they would not be compelled to participate in Christian religious exercises nor to attend on Jewish holy days. Jews were to pay taxes to the Protestant panel but would neither vote nor hold office. (Jewish teachers were first appointed in Montreal in 1913, but only in schools where most pupils were Jews. In Toronto, where Jews could vote and sit on the school board in those years, Jews were also denied teaching and supervisory posts.)

By 1914, almost half the "Protestant" school population of Montreal was Jewish, and Jews were growing restive. They were unwelcome in the Catholic system and would not, in any case, have chosen to send their children there. The goal of Catholic schools was "to build...character," so that Catholics "could perform their duties toward God." Protestant schools were imbued with the "Protestant Ethic" and sought to prepare pupils for worldly success by imparting a body of "objective" knowledge. Drawing their pupils from several Protestant denominations, they were less homogeneous than the Catholic schools and more comfortable for Jews. But the unofficial agreement between the Protestant School Board of Montreal and the Jewish community in effect even before 1903 stipulated that the city's schools should "be distinctly Protestant." Most members of the board were ministers who stamped upon the schools an unmistakably "Christian character." Many Protestant parents voiced objections to their children studying with Jews, and in 1910 a number of ministers demanded the expulsion of Jewish children from the Protestant schools. (In Ontario, the situation was better only by degree. There, too, schools were overtly Christian in character.)

By World War I, sentiment was growing among Jews for the creation of their own schools, an idea strongly favored by recently arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe. Canadianized Jews still preferred non-denominational schooling similar to that of the United States, out of a belief that only such a system could pave the way to full Jewish citizenship. In pursuit of the latter end the board of the Baron de Hirsch institute voluntarily downgraded its school to an after-hours religious school. But the development of secular, "neutral" schools was opposed by both Catholics and Protestants in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada. Only a few gentiles in the early years of the twentieth century — mostly freethinkers or anticlericals — advocated a unified, secular school system organized along language lines, rather like that accepted in 1997 in Quebec.

Jews were not free to go their own way. Both Catholics and Protestants would have resisted the creation of a Jewish school board in Quebec. Protestants feared fragmentation of the nation as well as diminution of their power in Montreal, were Jewish children to be removed from their schools. Catholics were averse to separate Jewish schools, even though a reduction in Protestant power would have augmented their own. Few of them wished to grant legitimacy to Judaism by giving it equal status with Christianity. Some Protestants agreed.

The arrangements just described remained in force in broad outline until after World War II. Over the years, however, the Protestant schools in both Quebec and Ontario willy-nilly became increasingly secularized, so that Jews felt more at home, even if they remained legally disabled and experienced considerable anti-Semitism. Radical change was signalled by the emergence of all-day Jewish schools in the 1940s. Only a small number of children were enrolled in those schools until well after World War II, but a process had begun that would have a major impact on Jewish life in Canada in subsequent years.

**Universities in the Early Years**

The situation at universities in these years bore some similarity to that in elementary and secondary schools. Until well after World War II, prejudiced administrators and faculty members expressed open hostility towards Jews as students and certainly as faculty. At King's College (later the University of Toronto) a religious test was in place until 1850, at Queen's University until the twentieth century. At the latter institution, a major battle was fought in 1912 (and largely lost) over whether the university could maintain its ties to the Presbyterian Church while receiving provincial subsidies, enrolling its faculty in the Carnegie Pension Fund, and being chartered by Parliament as a "national" university.

In these years, "tolerant" university people might welcome Jewish students and perhaps the occasional faculty member, but even they, or most of them, were antagonistic, if not contemptuous, of Jewish Studies, which they did not consider part of the "high culture" appropriate to the university curriculum. That culture was overwhelmingly white, male, European, and Christian. As in the United States and Europe, Jewish Studies, where found in the Canadian curriculum at all, served almost exclusively as the handmaiden of Christian Studies. Many of the teachers were Christian ministers, at Bishop's College in Quebec and King's College in Toronto, converted Jews.

McGill University in Montreal was an exception. When it opened in 1821, the Anglican Bishop of Montreal, Jacob Mountain, declared that all offices were "open either to Protestants or Roman Catholics, and [that] students of all denominations would be permitted to attend." Most unusual was the appointment of Rabbi Abraham De Sola in 1849 as professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages and later as professor of Spanish as well. (In 1858, McGill awarded De Sola an honorary LL.D., probably the first honorary degree conferred upon a professing Jew in the English-speaking world.) The rabbi's presence on campus, together with the institution's openness to Jewish students, seemed to indicate a measure of acceptance at McGill unique in the Western world. But after De Sola's death in 1882, Jewish Studies at McGill followed the pattern established elsewhere; only Christians were trusted to teach it. In the end, De Sola's career proved to be an anomaly, not a precedent, even in his own university. By the 1920s, McGill had instituted a rigid quota system designed to limit the number of Jewish students. As in the elementary and secondary schools in these years, Jews were unwelcome or present on sufferance in Canadian universities, and Judaism was granted little or no legitimacy. Religion — that is, Christianity — however, continued to be a major curricular and social influence.

**The Postwar Era**

As suggested earlier, the post-World War II years in Canada have been very different from the earlier era, at least with regard to the issue at hand. Perhaps the major background difference has been a shift from the former two-nations (French-British) conception to a new notion of Canada as a multicultural polity. To some extent, the shift is related to the rise of the "new ethnicity" and the ethnic-power movements in the United States. In part, it reflects the presence in the country of an increasing number of people of non-French, non-British origin as a result of the loosening of long-standing immigration policies. (One reason for the relaxation of the old rules was a sense of shame regarding Canada's role during the Holocaust.) More importantly, the change represents a conscious, late-1960s attempt to defuse the potential explosiveness of Quebec separatism. Quebec has been granted greatly augmented autonomy, but balanced by additional rights and powers for the country's other ethnic groups. The new understanding received official sanction and definition in a 1971 federal government policy statement on multiculturalism. That statement swept away the "special status" of the British and French cultural traditions — at least in theory — "in favor of ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism, as more authentic reflections of Canadian identity." According to this new definition of "who is a Canadian," Jews became one of the country's many legitimately distinct ethnocultural groups.

With regard to schools — and universities — two parallel developments have marked the years since the 1950s. A more open and diverse Canadian society has become much more hospitable to Jews — and others — who began to integrate into the country's political and social institutions. At the same time, various groups — but Jews rather more successfully than most others — began to fortify old communal institutions and to build new ones.

During these years, public schools in major centers around the country became "public" in the accepted North American sense of the word, that is, secular and non-denominational. With some qualifications, the same may be said of the "Protestant" schools of Montreal and, to a lesser degree, of Catholic schools in Quebec metropolitan areas. In 1965, Jews finally gained the right to sit on Montreal Protestant school boards, although that right was contested throughout the 1980s. In the universities by the mid-1960s, not only were Jews being accepted as students and faculty on an equal basis with gentiles, but Jewish Studies was beginning to make its way into the curriculum.

At the same time, the period saw the rapid growth of Jewish day schools to a degree unknown south of the border. By the mid-1980s, Montreal and Toronto each had about 7,000 children enrolled in day schools which ranged from secular Zionist to ultra-Orthodox. By 1998, enrollment in Toronto had risen to 10,287 children including preschool and high school, with only 6,314 children in supplementary schools. Growth in Montreal, where the Jewish population has declined

considerably in recent years, has been less marked. In 1998, the Toronto Jewish community, the country's largest with a population of more than 160,000, boasted nine mainstream elementary day schools (secular Zionist, Reform, Conservative, community Orthodox, Orthodox Zionist, Orthodox, Sephardi, non-denominational downtown, and arts-oriented) with a total of 16 branches. In addition, there are several ultra-Orthodox schools, ranging from nursery to post-secondary, a few of them of considerable size, several high schools ranging from community inclusive to ultra-Orthodox yeshiva, a small school for children with special needs, and a number of for-profit supplementary schools.

Interestingly, although the total Jewish day school population in Toronto rose by 7 percent between 1992 and 1998, there was a considerable drop in the number of children enrolled in Jewish preschools in those same years. This may augur a decline in upper grades in years to come. It may, however, merely reflect parental reluctance to pay private school fees for preschool, which they may consider to be of less crucial importance to a child's development than the later grades, especially since acceptable, low-cost alternatives are available.

About two-thirds of all Jewish children receiving any Jewish education in Canada in 1997 were enrolled in day schools, a proportion vastly larger than in the United States. In general, Canadian Jewish children are much more likely than American to receive some Jewish education (65 percent versus 45 percent), although less likely than Australians (70 percent) or Mexicans (85 percent). These figures may be inflated, but the overall picture would seem to be correct.

In the province of Quebec, the Jewish schools have enjoyed "associate" status with regard to the public schools since 1970 and receive public funding for more than half their costs. (The formula has varied over the years and is tied to the amount of instruction given in French.) In Alberta, Manitoba, and British Columbia, government funding in the form of pupil subsidies is available for Jews in day schools. Only in Ontario is there no public funding for day schools; in fact, there has been considerable resistance to any move in that direction. Jewish and other private schools appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada on the grounds of discrimination, but the appeal was unsuccessful.

No scientific study of the attitudes of non-Jews towards Jewish schools has been undertaken. It may be noted that when the question of public funding for Jewish schools in Ontario has been raised, there has been opposition in the press (the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, the country's most influential newspaper, for example) and elsewhere. This antagonism appears fuelled more by unwillingness to pay the bill than by ideological opposition to parochial schooling. Some Canadians do now ape American attitudes towards public education. The ethos of multiculturalism and the conception of Canada as a cultural and ethnic mosaic, however, make it awkward to raise objections to religiously- or ethnically-oriented schools in principle.

Morton Weinfeld and Phyllis Zelkowitz have noted that the Jewish schools in Montreal have become, in effect, the public schools of the Jewish community. (The same may be said of Toronto and Winnipeg.) In every center, the organized Jewish community offers considerable support to day schools. Although technically private, the schools do not — as a group — cater to the elite of the community. Scholarships are available to parents who cannot afford the fees, although some schools are more welcoming to low income families than others. Similarly the day schools do not serve the cultural or religious elite of the community. While the Orthodox sector of the community is much more active in the day school movement than any other, the school population, overall, ranges widely over the denominational, commitment, and observance spectrum. The schools also do not serve the intellectual elite of the community. Most endeavor to reach all children appropriate to their setting, those with special needs no less than the gifted. Attitudes to day school education among members of the Jewish community tend to parallel those of non-Jewish citizens towards the public schools. Funds spent on schools are viewed as an investment in the future well-being of the community.

Developments in the universities mirror those in primary and secondary education. Proposals to broaden the curriculum to include ethnic studies in the 1950s and beyond prompted fears that scarce funds would be diverted from other, more essential areas of scholarly enquiry and that enhanced ethnic power might contribute to the Balkanization of Canadian society. Most of all, they were afraid that ethnic communities would subvert academic standards and "objectivity" by insisting that ethnic studies actively seek to reinforce communal identity. The government of Canada, however, had no such qualms and actively pursued its goal of promoting and reinforcing the multicultural character of the country. The Ministry of Multiculturalism (downgraded by the present Liberal government and renamed the Department of Canadian Heritage) had established 26 chairs of ethnic studies across the country by mid-1993,

including a split chair in Jewish Studies at York University in Toronto and Concordia University in Montreal. No ill effects have been perceived, and objections to ethnic studies have all but disappeared.

Even more unusual than these publicly financed ethnic studies chairs, if one compares Canada to the United States, is the emergence at four universities of programs designed to train professional personnel for the Jewish community. Jewish teacher education programs were developed at York, McGill, and Manitoba (the last no longer functions), and an individualized social work program (also no longer functioning) was developed in cooperation with the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds of North America at the University of Toronto. Although unapologetically parochial in their focus and particularistic in their goals, these professional programs are not seen as problematic in the Canadian context. They are comfortably housed in secular, public universities, whose location undoubtedly serves to broaden their scope. Parallel programs to prepare teachers for Catholic (separate) schools can be found in several universities.

**Paradoxes and Their Resolution**

In comparing developments during the two periods sketched above, one cannot but note the paradoxes alluded to in the introduction. In the earlier period, certainly before World War I but even as late as World War II, religion was a major force in Canadian life. During those years church and state were intimately connected in some crucial areas. There was no officially established church, although the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec often behaved as if it were and was treated accordingly. However, schools that were ostensibly "public" no less than those that were by definition "separate" and confessional were heavily influenced by the Christian churches and assumed the task of inculcating Christian values. The atmosphere was similar in the universities. Jewish Studies, except where they served the purpose of providing a foil for the study of Christianity, were unwelcome. In general, in this period, the strong connection between religion and the state reinforced the Christian churches and was not helpful to Judaism.

Integration into French Canadian society at that time was a possibility only if one converted to Catholicism, and even then it was very difficult. Integration into Anglo-Canada was somewhat easier for a variety of reasons. But there, too, the price was conformity to WASP norms and values. The lack of a wall of separation between church and state was one of the main factors that made Jews into outsiders in this period. Especially during the long periods when French and English Canadians were at loggerheads, Jews found themselves rebuffed by both groups.

Jews reacted to this situation in a variety of ways. Some rebelled against their heritage. Most turned inward and worked at fostering an independent cultural and religious life of their own. The Zionist movement and Jewish religious practice present cases in point. Before World War I, Canada, along with South Africa and Belgium which are also bi-national countries, had the highest per capita Zionist membership of any country in the world. Jews could not be part of the French Canadian nation, and they could not really be part of English Canada either. Therefore, they turned to Jewish nationalism. In the realm of religion, they remained significantly more loyal to traditional Judaism than did their cousins in the United States, partly as a reflection of the conservative religious atmosphere of Canada itself, but also because little was to be gained in terms of integration into the larger society by watering down Judaism.

One area of Jewish life which went undeveloped in this period was education. Except for the two short-lived experiments in Montreal mentioned above, all-day Jewish schools did not emerge until the mid-1940s and then very gradually. Their development belongs to the later period. Although Canadian education in this period had an overtly religious character, and although Jews were considered interlopers even in the "public" schools, Jewish schools were not opened.

In the postwar period, on the other hand, Canadian society opened up to an unprecedented degree. Increasingly, all Canadians enjoyed the same life style, and there was less to distinguish one from the other. Legally, at least, no high wall of separation between church and state was built even then. Society, however, became increasingly secular, and the mainline churches lost some of their power — most dramatically, the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec.

By the 1970s Jews were participating in many areas of public and institutional life formerly closed to them, and Judaism took its rightful place as an insider religion. As schools became more secular, in the cities at least, they welcomed Jews. Jewish Studies became an accepted part of the university curriculum, almost a canonical subject. The new openness and secularity of Canadian society seemed to benefit Jews, but much less, the cause of religion in general. The growing strength of Conservative and Reform Judaism mirrored the waning strength of Roman Catholicism in Quebec

and of the Anglican and United Churches elsewhere.

What was less to be expected was that at the same time that opportunities for integration increased, the impetus for communal autonomy mounted. The development of autonomous communal institutions was particularly notable in the field of education. Precisely in this era the number of day schools multiplied, and more and more children were enrolled.

How can one explain these paradoxical developments? In fact, the explanations are relatively straightforward. In the earlier period, there was no critical mass of Jews, and the immigrant population did not have the resources to support separate Jewish schools. The Jewish community was too small, too new, too insecure, and too divided to acquire and exercise political clout. Squeezed between the two founding nations which were hostile to each other and even more hostile towards them, Jews lacked any positive reinforcement which would have encouraged them to invest in their own schools. Although they had the cultural space to develop a school system, it was largely negative space.

The more recent period has been characterized by a very different atmosphere. In terms of population and resources the community could now undertake building a school network. Less insecure about their place in Canada and now able to exert some political leverage, partly as a result of Canadians' guilt about their behavior during the Holocaust, Jews could assert themselves. But the main difference between the periods had to do with the political and social environment. In a Canada which viewed itself as multicultural — a nation of nations — religion became less important and ethnicity more important. Religion, in general, suffered, but Jews now had a rightful place equal to that of all the other ethnic communities. They had positive space in which to build their institutions — including schools — and felt free to do so. In recent decades, to be a good Canadian one has had to play one's ethnic card, and that could be done most effectively by supporting communal education. The results are seen in the proliferation of day schools and of Jewish Studies on university campuses.

One final word on fences and neighbors. As noted earlier, in both periods under discussion here there were no secure fences separating religion and state in Canada. That absence does not seem to have influenced the relationship of Jews and gentiles a great deal. Apparently, the intertwining of church and state has had little to do with making Jews and Christians good or bad neighbors with regard to education in Canada. Factors such as population and available resources have played a significant role in the equation. But the most important determinant of the quality of the relationship has been the way in which the connection between church and state has evolved against core conceptions of Canadian identity. Canadians can agree with Robert Frost, there seems to be no reason to "love a wall."

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Michael Brown, a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, is Professor of Humanities and Hebrew and Director of the Centre for Jewish Studies at York University in Toronto. He is the author of *The Israeli-American Connection, 1914-1945* (Detroit, 1996) and the editor, with Bernard Lightman, of *Creating the Jewish Future* (forthcoming). A version of this *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* was originally presented at the 1998 JCPA Summer Workshop on Jewish Political Studies, on the theme of "Religion in the Public Square."

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