

## **Challenging the Status Quo: An Examination of the History of Catholic Education in British Columbia**

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British Columbia is unique among Canadian provinces in that it has always been and remains the most unchurched region of the country, a fact that has greatly impacted the development of Catholic education there. Even before 1871, when British Columbia entered Confederation, it had rejected the notion of establishing a separate school system. Nevertheless, church leaders, especially Catholics and Anglicans, would continue to fight to obtain such a system, arguing that they were only asking for something that was then the norm in most of the country. In 1978 provincial funding, which now covers about seventy per cent of costs, was made available to all private schools, including religion-based institutions. Because of this, such schools now educate twice the number they did formerly or at present eight per cent of all students in the province. Yet Victoria, in providing public monies, did not establish a separate schools system, for the overwhelming majority of British Columbians are as strongly opposed as ever to that idea. Therefore, such funding could end as quickly as it began.<sup>1</sup>

Education in the far west had quite modest beginnings. Church-sponsored schools were started in 1849 when the Oblate, Honoré Lempfrit, made the first attempt to establish a Catholic school in Victoria. About then the Hudson Bay Company's Anglican chaplain, Robert Staines, began a similar enterprise. Class played an important role

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 312-21, 335; *Census of Canada*, 1991, 93-319; Harro Van Brummelen, "Religiously-based Schooling in British Columbia: an Overview of the Research," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society: British Columbia: Special Issue*, Vol. XXXVIII, no. 1, April 1996, 101, 105-06, 117-8.

in the type of students in these early schools. That is Staines' school was for the "better classes," namely, the English-speaking children of the Company's management, whereas Lempfrit's was for the "poor children of...[the] French Canadians" or the offspring of the Company's working class employees. However, Lempfrit's forced departure in 1852 after he was accused by the Cowichan of fathering a Native child put a temporary halt to Catholic education in the diocese of Victoria.<sup>2</sup>

In the years before the Fraser River gold rush of 1858, which marked the effective beginning of European settlement, local schooling continued to be problematic. In March 1853 the HBC established two schools to meet the needs of its working class employees, who were mainly, if nominally, Catholic. And though the Company rarely provided anything free of charge, tuition was quite low. There was no formal religious instruction, but there was Bible reading and prayer. Added to this, since all the schoolmasters were Protestant and most of their students were French Canadian Catholics, Modeste Demers, the first bishop of Victoria (1847-1871) considered this a grave danger to the pupils' Catholic faith, and desired to re-establish a Catholic alternative as soon as possible. Their Francophone parents, however, were apparently far more interested in having their offspring receive a general education, especially in speaking and reading English, than in learning the tenets of the Catholic faith. By the end of 1856 Demers was able to open a small school for boys. Yet since it was mainly intended to help support the diocese, which had few laity and by then only one priest, it charged fairly high fees, and thus would have been limited to the "better classes." Still, with his continued difficulty of obtaining and retaining clergy to run such institutions, especially those who could teach and speak English, this fact meant the school had difficulty attracting and keeping students. Finally, in 1858, with the arrival of the Oblates and the Sisters of St. Ann, both of whom had members who had English as their first language, this difficulty was solved. This resulted in the establishment of St. Louis

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Margaret Down, *A Century of Service: A History of the Sisters of Saint Ann and Their Contribution to Education in British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska* (Victoria, B.C.: The Sisters of St. Ann, 1966), 23-7, 34; Eugene de Mazenod, *Collection: Oblate Writings II: Letters to North America: 1851-1860* (Rome General OMI Postulation, 1979), 2:67-8, Mazenod to Lempfrit, 17 December 1853. Lempfrit was expelled from the Oblates on 20 September 1853 for "scandalous conduct in the diocese of Vancouver Island." Ibid. Patricia Meyer, ed. *Honoré-Timothée Lempfrit, His Oregon Trail Journal and Letters from the Pacific Northwest, 1848-1853* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1985), 21-7, 38-9, indicates that he was never defrocked nor censured, but returned to France and died in 1862 as the parish priest of Morville-Les Vic in the Moselle District.

College for boys and St. Ann's Academy for girls and signalled the true beginnings of Catholic education in the far west.<sup>3</sup>

St. Louis College was a continuation of the school Demers had founded in 1856. In running it, the Oblates were assisted by two clerics of St. Viator, François Thibodeau and Charles Michaud, whom Demers had brought back with him from Quebec in 1858. Then located on View Street, the school showed considerable success during the next five years, growing from under twenty-five to almost seventy-five students. As a result, in August 1863, the Oblates moved it to much larger quarters on Pandora Street where it was renamed St. Louis College in honour of the patron saint of the local Oblate superior, Louis D'Herbomez. The earliest records indicate that the Oblates, D'Herbomez, Julien Baudre, James McGuckin, Edward McStay, and Patrick Allen, all taught there. The last three were from Dublin, thus English was their mother tongue, vital for the college's continued growth and success.<sup>4</sup>

The overall curriculum, general standards, and discipline reflected the makeup of a more or less typical contemporary boarding school. At first, due to a serious lack of space, the college functioned only as a day school, a condition that would not have recommended it as well to the "superior" classes. Therefore, by 1860 it had begun accepting boarders, though day students continued to attend. Board and tuition were \$250 per annum, half that figure for day students, either amount indicating that the student body would have been limited to the well-to-do, for, though poorly paid, a good Chinese cook in Victoria then cost about \$300 a year. The curriculum covered the general arts and sciences. Yet, reflecting the importance of Victoria's growing business community, the prospectus also emphasised that "particular attention" would be paid to the "commercial" areas. As for religion, all denominations were welcomed, and

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Barman, "Transfer, Imposition or Consensus?: The Emergence of Educational Structure in Nineteenth Century British Columbia," in Nancy M. Sheehan, ed., *Schools in the West: Essays in Canadian Educational History* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprise, 1988), 242-8; D.L. MacLaurin, "The History of Education in The Crown Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Washington: 1936), 22-9; D.L. MacLaurin, "Education before the [Fraser River] Gold Rush," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* (October 1958), 251; Archives of All Hallows College, Dublin, Ireland (hereafter AHA), Demers to Woodlock, Victoria, 8 March 1853; BCARS, CC, F/395/1, Cridge to Douglas, Victoria, 20 November 1856. This is the earliest evidence of Demers' school for boys.

<sup>4</sup> Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa, Ontario (hereafter AD), P 2210-2239, D'Herbomez to Father General Émile Fabre, Report to Superior General, 1861; *Ibid.*, PC 101. V58C, 2, 3, 10, no author. Manuscript history of St Louis College, Victoria;

students were left to follow their own religious profession. Even so, it was stipulated that “for the sake of good order and regularity,” non-Catholics were asked to “conform to the general regulations of the establishment,” which meant taking part in community prayers.<sup>5</sup>

Complementing the Oblate college for boys, in 1858 the Sisters of St. Ann initiated St. Ann’s Academy, the first formal Catholic educational enterprise for girls in the region, and with it began a long tradition of their domination of Catholic education throughout the far west, that is until the 1960s signalled their steady decline due, like other women religious, to their inability to attract new members after Vatican II. Demers, in his attempt to use education as the major means of financially supporting and justifying the existence of the diocese, which then, as noted, had almost no lay adherents, decided to add a school for girls. Therefore in 1858 he went east to obtain nuns for that purpose and returned with four sisters: Mary Valois, Angèle Gauthier, Lumena Brasseur and Conception Lane who formed the first religious community and staff of the Academy of St. Ann, which was initially located on Park Street. Classes began in November 1858, and, as it was the only exclusively girls’ school in the city, the student roster even included the three daughters of Governor James Douglas. By 1863, when overall numbers had reached almost a hundred, part of school was moved to View Street and used the space resulting from the transfer of the boy’s school to Pandora Street. While the arts and sciences were not ignored, as would be expected for the period, “moral and domestic” training formed the backbone of a young lady’s education, and so St. Ann’s Academy was essentially a “finishing” school and remained so. However even then it had a “general” curriculum that stressed “practical” subjects, which by the turn of the century had developed into a commercial school for the training of secretaries. On the matter of religion, as at St. Louis College, all denominations were encouraged to apply, although with the same proviso, namely that all students “conform to the general regulations of the establishment,” which essentially involved attending daily prayers.<sup>6</sup>

As in the very first schools founded by Lempfrit and Staines, class played an important role in segregating student instruction, but race was

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<sup>5</sup> AD, PC 101.V58c, 2, *Prospectus of St Louis College*. . . *Victoria*, VI, nd. Note indicates “1863”; Derek Reimer, ed. “A Victoria Tapestry: Impressions of Life in Victoria, B.C., 1880-1914,” *Sound Heritage Series*, Vol. VII, No. 3. (1978), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Down, *A Century of Service*, 32-41; Archives of the Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria, B.C. (hereafter ASSA), Mary Pineault, “North Pacific Shores,” 72. Unpublished manuscript.

also important. Most Europeans were unwilling to associate with Native peoples or the several hundred African Americans who had come to Victoria because of the gold rush and the growing racist tensions in the United States during the Civil War (1860-65). Before their union in 1866, the gold rush also brought large numbers of Euro-Americans to the two colonies of Vancouver Island and the mainland, then called British Columbia. Certainly their strong presence heightened racism against African Americans, especially in Victoria. While the Oblates, given their desire to impose a reduction system on the Native people in an attempt to acculturate them into European ways, would naturally have excluded Native children from their school, they did admit African Americans to St. Louis College. However, they soon reversed the policy because of Euro-American opposition. In 1865 they tried to readmit African Americans, but with the end of the Civil War, most African Americans returned to the United States, and this fact and continued Euro-American racism ended the second and last attempt. Like the Oblates, by 1862 the Sisters of St. Ann had accepted African American girls into their school, but in the “general” and not the “select” division, which was limited to upper class “whites” where French and fine arts were taught, subjects excluded from the “general” curriculum. Nevertheless, a number of well-to-do African American business people in Victoria insisted that their daughters had an equal right to attend the “select” school. Both Demers and the sisters initially agreed. In the end, however, just as at St. Louis College, threats, especially from Euro-American parents that they would withdraw their daughters if they had to attend classes with African Americans, finally moved the bishop and the nuns to exclude black pupils.<sup>7</sup>

The Anglicans, in face of the Catholic challenge, had soon begun their own schools, namely, the Collegiate School for boys (1862) and the Angela College for girls (1864). In recommending the establishment of the two schools in 1860 to the English readers of the *Columbia Mission Report*, the first bishop of the Anglican diocese of British Columbia, George Hills (1859-1892), noted that while Catholics were not numerous in Victoria, they were “forward in the matter of education, both in the case of boys and girls.” Nevertheless, Hills was certain that Anglican schools would be popular, especially among the many Americans then in Victoria who would appreciate the “more substantial” English system.

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<sup>7</sup> AD, P 1399-1402, D’Herbomez to Fabre, 29 March 1865; ASSA, “Rules and Regulations for Pupils 1860,” Down, *A Century of Service*, 32-41; Barman, *The West Beyond the West* 66, 76, 85, 89, and 100; ASSA, Mary Pineault, “North Pacific Shores,” 72. Unpublished manuscript.

Hills was also concerned that, lacking an alternative, “the boys of the upper class,” who were mainly Anglican, were then going to the “Roman Catholic Bishop’s school.” Thus, Hills considered the matter of establishing Anglican schools to be “urgent.” As for his personal view of the Oblates as teachers, Hills commented privately that their principal instruction appeared to be “the worship of the Virgin and hatred of the Americans and English, while the French,” he added with disgust, “are exalted and extolled.”<sup>8</sup>

The early American presence in the two colonies also greatly influenced public education, especially in the popular determination to keep organised religion out of the public schools. Apparently inspired by the writings of Horace Mann (d.1859), an important American pioneer in public education, in 1860 a group of Americans established the first common school system in Victoria. Although they were not truly public, since they charged a small tuition fee, strictly non-denominational common schools gave local parents the first clear alternative to the city’s Anglican and Catholic schools.<sup>9</sup>

Due to poor management and financial problems, the common schools closed in 1864, but they had become so popular that there was a major public outcry for a truly public school system in Victoria. In April, a large city-wide general meeting supported the creation of a free system of non-religious public schools. Promoters of religion in public education in Victoria, realising the large American element in their audience, defended their position by referring to “an American work on education,” probably by Mann, which supported the teaching of identifiable Judeo-Christian religious values in public schools since they were believed to promote general morality. Trying to further buttress their case, defenders of religion cited the example of “an American School in Massachusetts” which taught religion as part of its curriculum. Yet a resolution at the meeting advocating the inclusion of religion in Victoria public schools lost and “by a large majority,” a defeat which “most in the audience” greeted with “loud cheers.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Frank A. Peake, *The Anglican Church in British Columbia* (Vancouver, B.C.: Mitchell Press, 1959), 72; Report (186), 14; British Columbia (Anglican) Diocesan Archives, Victoria, B.C. (hereafter BCDA), Hills to Secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Victoria, 8 May 1860.

<sup>9</sup> Barman, “Transfer, Imposition or Consensus?,” 242-8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 242-8; *The Colonist*, 11 April 1864. American authorities were the only ones cited at the meeting; *The Colonist*, 4, 13 April 1864.

Faced with such strong public support, the colonial government felt forced to agree. Shortly after the general meeting, a delegation elected by it presented Governor Arthur Kennedy with a petition demanding a tax supported, free public school system in Victoria that would exclude the teaching of religion. Kennedy conceded that such a system should be established and that the schools ought to be non-sectarian in order to insure social harmony and avoid “religious dissension,” which, he said, should not be allowed “to creep into the public schools.”<sup>11</sup>

On the subject of public education, reflecting its attitude towards organized religion, from the outset the far west was very different from most of the rest of the country and would continue so. Unlike in eastern Canada where separate schools were tolerated either by law or “gentleman’s agreement,” most people in British Columbia opposed such an idea. By the mid-1860s public opinion there, greatly influenced by a significant American presence, had effectively rejected even the possibility. And while this was certainly not an age of ecumenism, necessity can make strange bedfellows. For by 1871, when the province joined Confederation, the leadership in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in British Columbia made common cause in their vain attempt to initiate separate provincial school systems, or at least to gain tax support from their institutions. However, they would fail. In fact, the issue would continue to constitute the major focus of local public attitudes regarding organized religion, and this public rejection included even Catholics who in 1881 were the major denomination in the province, representing almost thirty per cent of the European population, though most were only nominal Catholics. Thus the overwhelming majority of “whites,” Catholic and otherwise, in Canada’s most non-sectarian province persisted in rejecting the idea of separate schools.<sup>12</sup>

The separate schools question was in large part a reaction by the churches, especially the Catholic church, to the liberal radicalism of the age, which had been sparked by the French Revolution. In its response, the Catholic church began to insist as never before that religious schools were essential in any healthy and truly “civilized” society. Certainly, the Oblates and other Catholic clergy saw eastern Canada as such a society since it was willing to support Catholic schools with its taxes. It was an assumption that was shared by some, mainly church leaders and a minority of their laity in British Columbia, especially Catholics and

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<sup>11</sup> Barman, “Transfer, Imposition or Consensus?,” 242-8; *The Colonist.*, 25 November 1864.

<sup>12</sup> Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 367.

Anglicans. Yet they hoped to be able to convince the rest of their fellow citizens to agree with their position.

By the mid-1860s the Catholic church was running more or less prospering schools for European students in Victoria and New Westminster. Also at this time, the Oblate, James McGuckin, head of St Joseph's Mission at William's Lake, had started schools for "whites" in the Cariboo. It demonstrated the hopeful temper of the period and that practicing Catholics, though remaining poor in numbers, were already somewhat prominent in education in the far west.<sup>13</sup>

The presence of denominational schools, mainly Anglican and Catholic, reflected the fact that organized religion was well represented in the two colonies, though there was little mutual respect among them. Both colonies then had places of worship representing Catholics, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Jews. Still, they showed little or no reciprocal tolerance, much less acceptance, of each other. For example, in Victoria, Father Charles John Seghers, the future bishop of Victoria (1873-78; 1885-86), wrote in April 1864 that he had "to avoid conversation twice" with the "quite friendly" local Protestant clergy, "all of whom were impressed," he said, with the local Catholic schools. Revealing a prejudice, that was probably mutual, Seghers noted he was "very distrustful of Protestant clergy" who he was certain were all "lying souls," and he defined the typical Protestant minister as one who "preaches the gospel just like a lawyer pleads his case." As for the Anglicans, he reported they were attracting the "best" class of citizens to both their churches and schools. For though they had lost their earlier bid to become "the established" church in the region, Seghers observed that the Anglicans were trying to make up for that fact by a "self-imposed segregation, thinking themselves superior to others." Of course, with regard to themselves, most Catholics, especially their clergy, believed exactly the same thing.<sup>14</sup>

As noted, due to bad management and financial problems, 1864 also witnessed the forced closure of the common schools in Victoria, thus, for a short time, the Catholics and Anglicans dominated local education. It

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<sup>13</sup> AD, P 5017-5018, McGuckin to D'Herbomez, 8 July 1867; *Ibid.*, P 5032-5054, McGuckin to D'Herbomez, 20 August 1867; *Ibid.* P 5036-5037, McGuckin to Frederick Lima, Esq, Richfield, 22 August 1867.

<sup>14</sup> American College, Louvain (Belgium) Archives (hereafter ACLA), Seghers to Rector John De Neve, Victoria, ND, probably late 1864; *Ibid.* Seghers to De Neve, Victoria, 11 April 1864; *Ibid.*, Seghers to "Priest," Victoria, written between 8 August and 19 September 1864; *Ibid.*. Seghers to Rev. Benedict Van Loo, Victoria, 30 September 1864.

was a distinction, however, that was very short lived, for in the spring of 1865, the colonial legislatures responded to strong public pressure by establishing the first free, tax-supported, public education system.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike his fellow clerics, most notably Catholic and Anglican, Bishop Demers never supported the idea of a separate school system. Influenced by his years (1838-1847) of ministering in the Oregon Territory, Demers accepted the fact that the entire Pacific Northwest was a highly secular, pluralistic, and liberal society, and likely to remain so. For Demers this was fine, as long as there were no exceptions made among Europeans. For example, in the early 1860s, he had requested a state subsidy to pay for books and other educational materials for two church day schools for Cowichan children. When the government replied that it could only supply funds to strictly non-religious schools, Demers publicly replied that he had “no objection to non-sectarian principles among the whites, if they be fairly carried out.” On the other hand, he believed the Native people were an exception, since they were financially unable to support their own schools, so the state was “in justice bound to provide the means of civilizing and educating them.” As for the Europeans, Demers felt that the province’s taxpayers had no obligation to fund separate schools.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the Catholics and Anglicans among his fellow clergy disagreed. Hoping to qualify as a separate school system, or least for a tax exemption, the Catholics were the first to respond to this new, but hardly surprising development. In May 1865 the Oblate president of St. Louis College, Victoria, Julien Baudre, petitioned the government for similar financial consideration. Baudre argued that St. Louis College, like any future public school, was already “open to all regardless of denomination or financial situation,” though the latter contention was certainly questionable given the high fees charged at St. Louis and St. Ann’s. The attorney general, George Cary, replied that neither St. Louis College nor any other denominational or private school in the two colonies could claim such status or have the right to any special treatment. On the other hand, the proposed public schools, Cary continued, qualified because “the public...[had] by law a perceived right to be educated,” and only the courts could alter such a legal understanding.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> MacLean, *Catholic Schools in Western Canada*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> BCARS, CC, F/433.10, Demers to William Young, Colonial Secretary, Victoria, 15 May 1862; *The Colonist*, 25 July 1862. “Letter to Rt. Rev. Dr. Demers.”

<sup>17</sup> BCARS, CC, B/12307/133, Baudre to Governor Arthur Kennedy, Victoria, 10 May 1865; *ibid*, Cary to Baudre, Victoria 12 May 1865.

In reaction, another Oblate, Léon Fouquet, decided to go on the offensive. After consulting with D'Herbomez and Baudre, in the spring of 1865 Fouquet published a pamphlet championing the right of Catholic parents to educate their children in their faith. He insisted that the graduates of such an education, given its high moral content, would become major contributors to the betterment of society in general. Therefore, Fouquet set "forth the injustice of compelling... [Catholics] to contribute to the support of a system of [public] education to which they could not conscientiously send their children," while at the same time they felt morally obliged for the "good" of both their church and society to pay for a separate Catholic educational system. The liberal editor of the *British Columbian* in New Westminster, John Robson, was quick to criticize Fouquet for "pretending" that Catholics, by their very existence, had a right to such special treatment. Robson, a Presbyterian, whose brother, Ebenezer was a prominent local Methodist minister, also challenged Fouquet's assumption that Catholic education was uniquely suited to contribute to the moral improvement of society, but rather, by its encouragement of religious bigotry, especially against Protestants, Robson believed it produced just the opposite effect.<sup>18</sup>

That June a number of Catholic laymen met in Victoria and passed several resolutions calling upon the government to establish a tax supported and separate school system in the two colonies. The government replied that such a plan would violate the recent School Act. About the same time the Anglicans issued a similar appeal which was also rejected.<sup>19</sup>

As its entry into Confederation approached, which took place on 20 July 1871 when British Columbia ceased to be a colony and became part of Canada, Bishop Hills complained to British readers of the *Columbia Mission Report* that the many American residents there had learned "to despise" the clergy as a result of attending the public education system in the United States. Like many Catholics, Hills feared that such a public system in British Columbia would eventually have the same effect, and

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<sup>18</sup> Adrian G. Morice, *Histoire de L'Église Catholique dans l'Ouest Canadien* (Montreal: Granger Freres 1915), 3:275, contains the reference to Fouquet's 1865 pamphlet which was published in Victoria; *British Columbian*, 29 April 1865.

<sup>19</sup> BCARS, CC, GR/1372/B/1364/F/1585. Seghers and Ten Catholic Laity to W.A.G. Young, Colonial Secretary, Victoria, 19 June 1865; *Ibid.*, R/103/1756, Young to Seghers, Victoria, 22 June 1865.

thus promote anti-clericalism in the province along with “infidelity, crime and immorality.”<sup>20</sup>

The Public School Act of 1872 settled the issue of separate schools in British Columbia. The official debate over the Act, especially dealing with section 93 of the British North America Act which dealt with the issue of public education, revealed a definite anti-clericalism among some provincial legislators. Unique to Canada, the 1872 Act effectively ignored the existence of denominational schools and carefully established a strictly non-sectarian character in the provincial public school system.<sup>21</sup>

None the less, church leaders continued to try to alter the situation, and, since they still dominated the religious schools of the province, Catholics and Anglicans, while somewhat uncomfortable partners, remained united on the issue. Both churches blamed the early American influence for creating what for them was this strange legislative contradiction that now opposed separate schools. In 1872, Hills repeated his earlier warnings that the “purely secular schools” of British Columbia would soon rival their counterparts in the United States which he believed were responsible for the “growing corruption” in America, even, he declared, to the “increase and impunity of the crime of murder.” As for the Catholics, sensing their bonds with the Anglicans on this issue, as the diocese was then without a bishop due to Demers’ death in 1871, its administrator, Father Charles John Seghers, argued that the Catholics and Anglicans “must” have their own system of education. Further, he insisted, it would be “unjust” to expect them to pay for two, and that it was therefore only “equitable” that church schools in the province should have a fair share of any public education funds. As in America, Seghers insisted, the Catholics and Anglicans in British Columbia were being expected to support their own system, “at great sacrifice,” as well as the public one, which was simply unfair. In short, it was the reasoning that had led to the establishment of separate school systems in most of eastern Canada.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Report of the Columbia (Anglican) Missions* (hereafter *Report*) (1866) 27-8; *Ibid.*, (1867), 92-3; *Ibid.*, (1868) 113.

<sup>21</sup> *The Colonist*, 2 April 1872; *Daily Standard*, 8 April 1872; C.B. Sissons, *Church and State in Canadian Education* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1959), 371. Notes the uniqueness of British Columbia on the issue.

<sup>22</sup> *Report* (1872), 48-72; Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed. *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 1975) xviii; BCARS, CC, Add. Ms. 505, vol. 1, F/18, Seghers to Helmcken, Victoria, 18 February 1869.

Clearly British Columbia was the most secularized province in Canada and would continue to move in that direction. In both Europe and North America the elementary school became a major international battlefield of church and organized religion pitted against the state and modern secular society. By the School Act of 1872 the public schools of the province were to teach the “highest morality and no religious doctrine.” This was in contrast to the Vancouver Island School Act of 1865, which had permitted religious instruction by clergy, but only after school hours. In little more than a decade, the provincial legislature would exclude clergy from holding any position, voluntary or otherwise, in the public system. As for any religious exercises, by 1876 only teachers could conduct them, and they were limited to no more than the public recitation of the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments.<sup>23</sup>

With the continued hope of being heard, in the early 1880s the Catholic bishops of British Columbia again raised the separate schools question. Their action was occasioned by new provincial tax legislation in the spring of 1881 to fund the first two public high schools in Victoria and New Westminster. While Seghers was then the archbishop of Portland (1881-1885), he kept in close contact with events in British Columbia, and certainly continued to share and support the views of his colleagues there. After several years in Oregon, he wrote that he had come to “hate American ideas,” even more so than when he had first experienced them while living in Victoria, especially the belief in the strict separation of church and state. If anything, Seghers’ time in the United States only heightened his loathing for American culture, particularly its rugged individualism and its extreme pluralism. It also hardened his ultramontane view of reality, especially the belief that the Catholic church was the only natural educator of the young; whereas the state had no right to operate schools. However, he found that Oregon Catholics were even more indifferent to organized religion and church schools than those in British Columbia, a fact which only strengthened his resolve. Thus shortly after becoming archbishop in 1881, Seghers made a dire prediction in an address which he had published in his diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Sentinel*, namely, that unless the Catholic laity of Oregon funded and supported parochial schools, their

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<sup>23</sup> Hubert Jedin, ed. *History of the Church*, (Crossroad: New York, 1989), 9:209; Charles E. Phillips, *The Development of Education in Canada* (Toronto: Gage, 1957), 326; *British Columbia Sessional Papers* (Victoria: Queen’s Printer, 1876), 725.

children would “never enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” “I say it,” he solemnly concluded, “without bitterness and without fear.”<sup>24</sup>

Although they certainly agreed with Seghers’ theology, the three Catholic bishops in British Columbia, Louis D’Herbomez, the vicar apostolic of British Columbia (1863-1890), and his coadjutor, Paul Durieu, the first bishop of New Westminster (1890-1899) and John Brondel, the third bishop of Victoria (1879-1883), were not prepared to go to such extremes, at least not publicly. Yet their petition to the Legislative Assembly did complain of the “sect of irreligionists” in the province whose only wish, they said, was to destroy all organized religion. They even predicted that such publicly funded schools would be a “source of evil,” and would produce only “immoral youth.” They also contended, as good ultramontanists, that the state, under natural law, had no rightful role in education. In an apparent attempt to demonstrate how “fair” Catholics could be when compared to “secularists,” even when the former were the overwhelming majority in a particular society, they cited Quebec. There, they contended, the “Protestant minority” enjoyed the “educational advantages” of provincial funding, a situation that should now be extended to the Catholic church in British Columbia.<sup>25</sup>

There was little response to their petition among the general public in British Columbia, perhaps indicating its ever-growing perception of the general irrelevance of organized religion. However, two newspapers in New Westminster did mention it, and the editor of the *Dominion Pacific Herald*, John Robson, a future premier, who had long opposed such a plan, critiqued it. He wondered how the bishops could compare British Columbia, which was so “thinly populated,” with any other Canadian province. He also questioned, that, if permitted, most Catholics in British Columbia would even avail themselves of such an opportunity. And he based his assumption on Ontario, where, he said, though the Catholic bishops had “fought and won” the “battle of separate schools,” few Catholic parents then seemed interested in sending their children to such tax-supported institutions. D’Herbomez responded, though he ignored addressing the issue of Ontario, saying only that the present public school system in British Columbia was “partisan, oppressive and

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<sup>24</sup> *British Columbia Sessional Papers* (1881), 517, 20 March 1881; ACLA, Seghers to De Neve, Victoria, 1 August 1867; PAA, Seghers to F.N. Blanchet, Portland, 10 September 1881; *Catholic Sentinel*, Portland, Oregon, 10 November 1881.

<sup>25</sup> *British Columbia Sessional Papers* (1881), 517, 20 March 1881; *Dominion Pacific Herald*, 9 March 1881

unjust,” and that it had been made “Godless” with the sole purpose of favoring “irreligionists.”<sup>26</sup>

By 1883 the Legislative Assembly was still unmoved. Again the three bishops petitioned it, and this time Brondel was so confident that he declared that even the premier, William Smithe, now supported the Catholic cause. Thus, he told D’Herbomez that he was certain that the bishops would gain everything they hoped for “within a year.” Of course as the leader of the so-called “peace party” of British Columbia, which had been formed to accelerate the completion of the railroad, Smithe was perhaps even less hesitant than most politicians in his desire to please all sides. However, Bishop Hills was equally convinced that the churches were about to triumph, for he could hardly imagine the alternative. In a rather dire warning to the receptive readership of the *Columbia Mission Report*, Hills predicted that without a separate school system to challenge it, public schools in British Columbia would soon produce a generation that was so morally corrupt that it was, he declared, “too lamentable to [even] picture.” Again, except as an early and very mild example of ecumenism, such unity of purpose between the Catholics and Anglicans produced nothing. For by the mid-1880s it was clear to all but the most obtuse that British Columbia was a thoroughly secular society and destined to remain so; organized religion would certainly be tolerated there, but little more could be expected.<sup>27</sup>

Due probably to the serious economic problems of the last decade of the nineteenth and much of the first half of the twentieth century, the separate schools question did not again become a public issue until after 1945, when, as before, it dominated press reports on the Catholic church in British Columbia. On 20 November 1947, in the course of dedicating a new parochial school in Vancouver, Archbishop William Mark Duke (1931-64) declared that, like the rest of Canada, the Catholics of British Columbia had a right to separate schools, including a Catholic university. In order to achieve this, Duke felt that Catholics had to be “noisier” than,

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<sup>26</sup> *British Columbia Sessional Papers* (1881), 517, 20 March 1881; *Dominion Pacific Herald*, 9 March 1881; *Mainland Guardian*, 4 May 1881; D’Herbomez to Editor of *Herald*, 15 March 1881; AD, P 2255-2265, Separate School File. 1881.

<sup>27</sup> *British Columbia Sessional Papers* (1883), 397, 20 March 1883; Bishops’ Petition; VAA, Brondel to D’Herbomez, Victoria, 20 March 1883; Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Vancouver, B.C.: Macmillians, 1958), 290, 295-6; Lawrence B. Palladino, *Indian and White in the Northwest or The History of Catholicism in Montana* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co. 1894), 361-62; L.W. Downey, “The Aid-to-Independent Schools Movement in British Columbia,” in Sheehan, *Schools in the West*, 305-21; *Report* (1882-1883), 19.

what he called, certain “small groups.” He was referring to the evangelical Protestants in the Lower Fraser Valley, whose demands, he declared, while they were “not nearly so reasonable” as those of Catholics, used public pressure methods that were calculated to achieve the desired objective. A few days later the regional edition of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) *News* responded to Duke’s challenge. It praised British Columbia as the only province in Canada that had studiously avoided mixing “organized religion and public affairs,” the clearest example of which being its refusal to fund separate schools, which the *News* insisted, “proved so disastrous” in the rest of the country. The *News* also asserted that the province’s non-sectarian public school system had the great benefit of developing a “democratic attitude to life,” especially by “wielding together people of diverse backgrounds.” Duke, in a mildly worded letter to the *News*, naturally took exception to such a conclusion. However, his diocesan controlled newspaper, the *B.C. Catholic* went much further, asserting on 4 December that the CCF editorial contained “shades of Nazism,” something that a “shouting Goebbels” would have applauded. In reply, the *News* dubbed the *B.C. Catholic* piece “arrant nonsense,” and that its “intolerant tone” only served to prove the point of their objection, for the *News* was convinced that a separate provincial school system would only “place walls of intolerance between young people.” Nor, it felt, could such schools provide the “objective and unbiased education possible in non-secular schools,” which it believed were “sorely needed in a democratic society.”<sup>28</sup>

Because of an overwhelming lack of interest in the idea of separate schools on the part of the largely nominal Catholic laity of the province, when 1951-52 produced a major exception in Maillardville where strong lay interest in the issue was forthcoming, it failed because of the traditional tensions between Anglophone and Francophone Catholics in supporting each other. The Maillardville school strike was led by the area’s French Canadian working-class parents. However, apparently because it had not originated with the local Anglophone hierarchy, the bishops of the province essentially ignored it. In any case, in the hope of obtaining a separate system, in April 1951, the French parents in Maillardville removed eight hundred and fifty students from their Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Their action was mainly a protest against “double taxation” in that they were required to support the

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<sup>28</sup> *BC Catholic*, 20 November 1947; *CCF News for British Columbia and the Yukon*, 27 November 1947; *BC Catholic*, 4 December 1947; *CCF News for British Columbia and the Yukon*, 11 December 1947.

public schools as well as their own. The major effect of the strike, which would last until September 1952, was to further encumber an already overburdened public system, which was then on double shifts due to the postwar baby boom. Yet through continued campaigning, by 1957 the Millardville Francophone community had obtained textbook subsidies, healthcare funding, and property tax exemptions for their Catholic schools, benefits which would subsequently be extended to other private schools in the province. On the other hand, except for such relatively minor concessions from Victoria, the Maillardville school strike mainly underscored the lack of Catholic unity in the province regarding the issue.<sup>29</sup>

In 1953 and 1954 the separate schools question was again raised. As before, some Catholics in British Columbia, especially bishops such as the “Iron” Duke, initiated the debate and publicly condemned the refusal of Victoria to support Catholic schools as “manifestly unjust.” In March 1953, in a published letter to the premier, W.A.C. Bennett, the Catholic Women’s League repeated a long held belief among a minority of local Catholics that the provincial public schools system would never be acceptable to “good” Catholics since they were manifestly “Godless” and thus implicitly immoral. On the other hand, opponents of a separate schools system in British Columbia were equally adamant, calling Roman Catholic desires “outrageous demands,” and in 1953 one local critic insisted that if they “had the power,” Roman Catholics would “dominate the world more ruthlessly than the Russians.” In 1954 J.B. Rowel, the pastor of the Central Baptist Church in Victoria and veteran critic of Catholicism, published a pamphlet entitled: “Separate Schools: A Vital Question.” He noted that some Catholic bishops used as a threat the fear of hell and even excommunication to intimidate Catholic parents into sending their children to parochial schools. He also observed that in both Ireland and Spain, where the church had considerable public support, Protestants were still referred to in school textbooks as “heretics.” In addition, he also cited a church history book, published in the late nineteenth century but still in use in the state-funded Catholic schools in Ireland. In it, Rowel reported, the priest author, T. Gilmartin, suggested that the state had a duty “in suppressing heretics” even to the point of imposing the “death penalty.” Though a less jaded observer might have cited textbooks then in use in Ontario’s separate system that were not overtly abusive of Protestantism, the isolated nature of organized religion in British Columbia tended to bring out the very worst in everyone concerned, but especially those in the churches. Thus, as in the past, the

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<sup>29</sup> Downey, “The Aid-to-Independent-Schools,” 311.

separate schools controversy generated far more heat than light in the far west, and in the end, only demonstrated the inherent divisiveness of all extreme denominationalism. With their hopes for a separate system again defeated, Catholics in British Columbia, particularly its bishops, once more retreated to lick their wounded feelings.<sup>30</sup>

Although not as a separate schools system, in 1978, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia finally did agree to begin funding non-public schools. This change, as Duke noted, was mainly influenced by a steady increase of conservative Christian immigration to the Lower Fraser Valley which had begun after 1945, especially Dutch Calvinists and other strongly traditionalist/conservative evangelical Protestant denominations. As is clear from recent statistics, such churches have more than doubled since 1981, and, with over half a million, British Columbia, the most unchurched province in Canada also contains, paradoxically, one of the nation's most significant "Bible belts." Beginning at thirty per cent, within a decade Victoria was covering over seventy per cent of private education costs. Such funding has resulted in pupils in private schools in British Columbia doubling to eight per cent. There are several other ironies here, chief among them being that between 1965 and 1978 Catholic education in British Columbia very noticeably declined because of a lack of inexpensive teachers from religious orders. Now, because of provincial funding, student numbers in Catholic schools are about twice what they were during their previous high levels in the 1950s. Their earlier decline was partly the result of the growth of social liberalism after 1945, witnessed especially in public education and public welfare such as in health care and other areas. Yet, another important factor in their failure to grow during this previous period was, as noted, the historic lack of Catholic unity or lay interest. This was mainly due to the fact that most of the laity had always preferred to send their offspring to free public schools rather than to pay tuition for any Catholic alternative. For while census figures show Catholics to have always been one of the largest denominations in the province, the bishops have never been able to interest most of the laity in supporting a separate system. Yet, as Duke observed in 1947, it is now the highly conservative evangelical churches of British Columbia that are providing the political clout to win something for the Catholic bishops that they had never been able to achieve on their own. At the same time, because of a growing lack of public support for separate schools, Quebec and Newfoundland have

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<sup>30</sup> BCARS, Box 11/File 1, R. Hull to Bennett, 14 December 1954; *CCF News*, 27 November 1947; *ibid.*, 11 December 1947; J.B. Rowell, *Separate Schools: A Vital Question* (Victoria: Privately Published, 1953), 1-32.

recently abandoned the concept. Even so, contemporary studies show that most parents who send their children to religious schools in British Columbia as elsewhere, especially Catholic ones, do so mainly for non-religious reasons such as smaller classes, more discipline, less fear of drugs, pre-marital sex, and even classism. Religious instruction is a quite secondary consideration in their decision, whereas before 1965 religion had been a central factor in that decision. Actually, well over fifty per cent of parents who now send their children to Catholic schools in the province are not Catholic nor do they appear to have much interest in converting.<sup>31</sup>

As for Catholic higher education, St. Mark's College, on the UBC campus, was for years the hoped-for site of an independent Catholic liberal arts college that the local hierarchy, especially Archbishop Duke hoped could gain university status and provincial support and funding. The first Catholic college founded in British Columbia in 1931 was the Seminary of Christ the King, which, after it was placed under the Benedictines, moved to Burnaby in 1940. Therefore, while St. Mark's was viewed by UBC authorities as a potential school of theology, Catholic leaders, particularly Duke saw no need for another seminary since Christ the King was already fulfilling that role. Although in 1950 the Basilians began to teach at UBC, Duke's insistence that he must have an independent institution meant that St. Mark's remained unincorporated until 1956, when Henry Carr, CSB, became its first principal. However, like its neighboring denominational colleges, it could only grant degrees in theology. Since very few lay Catholics were interested in majoring in theology, and the archdiocese was bound to protect the interests of Christ the King as the diocesan seminary, St. Mark's remained in an educational limbo. While it was used as a residence hall, given the unwillingness of UBC to make an exception for St. Mark's that it was not prepared to extend to its denominational neighbors, the desire to found such a Catholic liberal arts college in Vancouver failed.<sup>32</sup>

Things seemed more hopeful when Notre Dame University of Nelson began in 1950. Martin Johnson, the first bishop of Nelson (1936-1956) and later Duke's coadjutor (1956-1964) and successor (1964-1969), was its founder. Johnson wanted to provide a local alternative for Catholics

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<sup>31</sup> Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 335, 312-21, 367-8; *Census of Canada, 1991*, 93-319; Van Brummelen, "Religiously-based Schooling in British Columbia," 101, 105-06, 117-18; Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: the Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987), 87-91.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence K. Shook, *Catholic Secondary-Education in English-Speaking Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 373-91.

in the Kooteneys so that they would not have to go to the nearby Jesuit (Gonzaga) university in Spokane, Washington, since most Canadians who went there remained and even became American citizens after graduation. Notre Dame continued to struggle to gain provincial recognition until 1963 when it was granted a provincial charter along with the Universities of Simon Fraser and Victoria. Yet most local Catholics who could afford to do so did not wish to attend a small, purely “Catholic” institution, but rather preferred the non-sectarian alternatives where there were larger faculties and better equipment. Good faculty were also hard to obtain or retain given Nelson’s relative remoteness, and worse, its city fathers took little interest in a “Catholic” university, which meant operating money, essential to its survival, was very hard to obtain. All of these problems finally lead to its closure in 1983.<sup>33</sup>

The hopelessness of such an undertaking seemed already clear in the early 1950s, although Duke would never budge in his determination to have a separate Catholic university. At a meeting set up to review a provincial government offer to fund St. Mark’s, but only as a theological college, an intractable Duke insisted that he only “wanted a Catholic university.” One of the three Catholic lay members at the meeting, Angelo Branca, a well-known provincial judge and alumnus of UBC, angrily retorted: “where the hell are you going to get the money?” When Duke refused to discuss the matter further, Branca “stamped out” of the meeting, and as a result, the Catholic college project went nowhere then, nor did it progress thereafter. Still, against a backdrop of recent public funding of primary and secondary private education a minority of Catholics in British Columbia continue to hope that a Catholic liberal arts college may still become a reality. Yet, if the rest of Canada is any indication, where most such institutions have been taken over by provincial governments, this is most unlikely.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the essentially intransigent Catholic minority in British Columbia, the Catholic electorate in Quebec and Newfoundland appear to see little value in separate church schools. In Quebec, language and not denomination is now the determining factor in defining its separate boards. In Newfoundland, in a September 1997 referendum, the public, of which over thirty per cent are Catholic, voted by a resounding majority of over seventy per cent to end publicly funded denominational schools. In responding to the results, Premier Brian Tobin, a Catholic, noted that

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<sup>33</sup> Shook, *Catholic Post-Secondary Education*, 395-405; Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 302.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent Moore, *Angelo Branca: “Gladiator of the Courts,”* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1981), 78.

if the churches still wished to educate their children in their religious traditions, it must henceforth be their duty and not that of the taxpayer to fund such institutions. In addressing the results, Tobin noted: “parents, not the churches, will have the ultimate right and responsibility to direct their children’s education.” “We will hire our teachers because they are competent, caring and committed, not because of any religious consideration.” From this time forward, he said, parents and elected legislators would be accountable, and not “non-elected and unaccountable church representatives,” who would “have no special role and no special place in the new school system.”<sup>35</sup>

Since the 1860s in British Columbian society, such a non-sectarian public view has dominated and continues to do so. It is true that for the last twenty years provincial funds have been available for non-public schools, however, as noted, the overwhelming majority of Catholics who send their children to such private schools do so for non-religious reasons. It is very possible that such funding could end as quickly as it began, especially if there is a perceived improvement in public schools in the province, or if, on the other hand, long a tradition in British Columbia, there is a public reaction against what many must even now consider special treatment for private, mainly religion-based schools.

As Premier Tobin noted if church leaders in Newfoundland wish to have such schools, in the future they will have to obtain funding directly from their laity. To do so Catholic bishops there as elsewhere must convince them that a religion-based education is better than a public alternative. For certainly at present most of the Catholic laity, the core of the *sensus fidelium*, in Quebec and Newfoundland, and certainly this would include British Columbia, do not believe so. In 1865, as seen, John Robson, the liberal editor of the *British Columbian* and a future premier, wrote that it behooves Christian denominations to stop “pretending” that they are uniquely suited to contribute to the moral improvement of society.<sup>36</sup> But rather, as history and the present show, by their frequent encouragement of religious bigotry, particularly in their often negative thinking in such areas as denominationalism, gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, they, in fact, have actually produced just the opposite effect. As such, church history then as now would seem to support Robson’s conclusion. For far from improving general morality, especially in the recognition and support of a pluralistic society that respects and encourages diversity and even ambiguity, religious education has many

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<sup>35</sup> Premier Brian Tobin’s address following the referendum on education reform in Newfoundland and Labrador, 2 September 1997, [www.gov.nf.ca](http://www.gov.nf.ca).

<sup>36</sup> *British Columbian*, 29 April 1865.

times promoted quite opposite attitudes, and especially since it has frequently fostered religious and other forms of narrowness and intolerance. Perhaps the churches can reform themselves and through serious ecumenism rid themselves of these negative elements and become truly counter-cultural in encouraging ever greater social tolerance and acceptance of others, and so challenge their all-too-frequent historic support of the status quo.