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Methodist Political Involvement in the School Bible Issue: the Council, The Christian Advocate and Journal, the Mayor, and the Superintendent of Schools

Abstract:

During the early 1840s in New York City, prominent members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, both lay and clergy, used four political avenues to oppose Roman Catholic efforts to both secure public funds for their own parish schools and also eliminate the daily reading of the King James Bible. These avenues included participation before the Common Council, “political” editorials in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, the election of a strongly pro-Bible Methodist mayor, and appointment of a similarly-minded Methodist superintendent of schools. The questions of what caused the Methodists to take such a strong stand and why some compromise could not be achieved are also addressed.

Keywords: Bishop John Hughes, James Harper, David Reese, nativism, New York City schools

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Introduction

Those who are used to Methodism's 20th and early 21st century record of generally taking politically liberal positions will be shocked to learn that the Methodist Episcopal Church (hereafter, MEC) of the mid-19th century could easily be described as the "religious right" of its time. Indeed, it may come as a surprise to 21st century Methodist sensibilities nurtured in the ecumenical movement to know that, in the 1840s, many Methodists in New York City (hereafter, NYC) used the existing political process to strenuously oppose Catholic efforts to change the Protestant-oriented school system. Moreover, these overtly political efforts contrast with the standard Methodist narrative of exponential growth during the first half of the 19th century through evangelistic preaching, camp meetings, tract distribution, book publishing, and missions. Indeed, some well-known NYC Methodists, such as Phoebe Palmer, generally avoided all political involvement so as to focus on spiritual concerns. Yet, during the first part of the 1840s, as Irish Catholic immigration surged in NYC, many Methodist pastors and laity had absolutely no hesitation in leading the political support for the increasingly controversial practice of reading the King James Bible (hereafter, KJB) in the "common schools." This article will show how many NYC Methodists politically supported the Bible issue through their intervention at the Common Council (hereafter, CC), their own editorials in the *Christian Advocate and Journal* (hereafter, CAJ) editorials, the election of a pro-Bible Methodist mayor, and the appointment of a Methodist superintendent of schools.

Before showing how NYC Methodists practically led the attack, it is necessary to provide the social, political, and religious context for the controversy.

Socio-Cultural Context: Catholic Resistance to Protestant-Oriented "Common Schools"

Denominational "free schools" or "charity schools," as they were sometimes called, and the Public School Society (hereafter, PSS), a multi-denominational voluntary organization, provided the earliest free education for children in NYC. The Methodist "charity school" had been established in the 1790s and the PSS in 1805 as a way to educate any child who could not afford the expensive private schools. A board of trustees and a president governed the PSS and, by 1840, it administered one hundred schools. Denominational schools had ceased to exist in 1824 when the Common

Council voted to stop giving public funds to religious schools. Although the PSS was not sectarian, it did provide moral and religious instruction of a more general type through daily Bible reading, hymns, prayers, and a book of religious exercises based on a question and answer format. This approach, however, was challenged in 1840 as Irish Catholic immigration steadily increased. Due to the Protestant orientation of the common schools, many Irish Catholic parents kept their children either at home or had them attend the eight overcrowded parish schools. Concerned about this problem, Governor William Seward made the education of children a top priority in his annual message to legislators in January 1840 (Bourne 1870: 636-644).

The Political Context

Although this issue began as a strictly local issue, it soon involved three relatively new national political parties: the Democrats, the Whigs, and the American Republican Party (hereafter, ARP). Formed in the 1820s, the Democrats appealed to the working class, welcomed immigrants into their party, and ultimately supported the Catholic cause for change. The Whigs, who began a decade later, had a constituency of businessmen such as manufacturers, shopkeepers, merchants, and ship owners. It also included many conservative Protestant evangelicals since its platform favored such moral issues as temperance and strict observance of the Sabbath. Moreover, its anti-Catholic and anti-immigration positions led it to oppose any change in the Protestant-oriented common schools. The third national party, the ARP, originated in New York City in 1842 with an even stronger anti-Catholic and anti-immigration platform. Unsurprisingly, it also gave vehement support to retaining the KJB in the schools (Reichley 1992: 89-108).

The Intersection of Religion and Politics

From 1840 to 1845, five leading Methodists played critical roles in the “Bible in the Schools” controversy: Dr. Thomas Bond, Rev. George Peck, Rev. Nathan Bangs, James Harper, and Dr. David Reese. In 1840, Bond, Peck, and Bangs, working as a committee, submitted a “remonstrance” to the CC challenging the Catholic petition asking for public funds for their own schools. Bond was a medical doctor from Baltimore and local preacher who had been appointed as editor of the CAJ in 1840. Peck was the new editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review* (hereafter MQR). Bangs

had served as the first editor of the CAJ from 1828 to 1832 and editor of the MQR beginning in 1832 (Simpson 1878: 86, 116, 698). The fourth key Methodist was James Harper who was born in Newton, Long Island, in 1795 to devout Methodist parents. At age sixteen, he was apprenticed to Abraham Paul, a printer in Manhattan, who was a fellow Methodist. Six years later, he and his brother John started their own printing company, which became Harper and Brothers in 1833. In early 1844, the ARP nominated him as their mayoral candidate due to his strong support for the retention of Bible reading in the schools, which had become a hotly contested issue since 1840. Due to his sterling reputation as a businessman and a devout Christian, he was elected mayor with strong Whig support in April, 1844. During his one-year term, he reformed the police department, improved municipal services, and hired people based on their ability and not on party affiliation (Caliendo 2010: 256-259, 399-401). Finally, Dr. David Reese played a key role in the administration of the public schools. Reese had graduated from medical school and practiced medicine in Baltimore before arriving in NYC in 1820. Reese was a local preacher, a manager of the Missionary Society of the MEC, and president of the Young Men's Missionary Society (1830-1838). In 1844, he was appointed as the superintendent of schools for the city and county of New York where he championed the reading of the KJB in the common schools.

Review of the Literature

Since the public school issue occurred in NYC and had national implications for both the states and the Catholic Church (which eventually formed its own parochial school system), it has generated a significant amount of scholarship with most of it coming from the Catholic authors. This scholarship can be grouped into four main categories. First, primary source materials include the petitions and remonstrances in the published documents of the Board of Aldermen, William Bourne's magisterial History of the Public School Society of the City of New York (1870), and Bishop Hughes' correspondence and addresses. Second, contemporary accounts of the issue can be found in both the religious and secular press of the time and William L. Stone's History of New York City (1868). Third, three biographies (by Catholic authors) of Bishop Hughes present the issue through his perspective. These include Life of the Most Reverend John Hughes (1866) by John Hassard, the bishop's secretary; Dagger John (1977) by Richard Shaw; and Dagger John and the Making of Irish America by

Richard Loughery (2018). Finally, Vincent Lannie's *Public Money and Parochial Education* (1968) and *Gotham*, by Edward Burrows and Mike Wallace (1999) provide extremely helpful overviews. To sum up, the primary source materials are abundant and accessible and the Roman Catholic position is thoroughly presented since Bishop Hughes was such a pivotal figure in the development of the Catholic Church in America who also left an extensive amount of letters and other materials. Yet, no scholarly work has yet described the Methodist opposition and attempted an analysis of their efforts.

Methodist Political Involvement (1): The Common Council (1840)

The first way that Methodists engaged in the political process was their three-pronged campaign over eight months in 1840 to persuade the CC to reject repeated Catholic requests for public funds for their own schools and the elimination of both the KJB and Protestant-oriented textbooks. Spurred on by intense frustration with the anti-Catholic bias of the "common schools" and encouraged by a sympathetic governor (Seward), the Roman Catholic leadership sent a petition to the CC in March, 1840, for assistance who then referred it to the Committee on Arts and Sciences and Schools (Lannie 1968: 32). Alarmed at the Catholic petition and Irish Catholic immigration in general, several denominations sent remonstrances (i.e, counter-petitions) to the council including one by the Methodists, which was "signed by Gilbert Coutant and one thousand and seventy-six others" (Board of Assistants 1840: 378). The Methodist remonstrance noted that in 1824 the CC had ended the policy of giving public funds to denominational schools. Although the Methodists had argued against that new law, it had, along with all the other denominations, accepted the council's decision. The remonstrance further stated its approval of the PSS's administration of the schools and warned the council that giving public funds to Catholic schools would, "in their estimation, be a perversion of the Public School Funds" (Board of Assistants 1840: 378-80). A month later, the committee on the schools urged the rejection of the Catholic petition based on two reasons: the 1824 law and state and federal constitutions that barred public funds for religious groups in an attempt to keep the church and state separate. Unsurprisingly, the council voted sixteen to one to reject it (Lannie 1968: 32-34, 44-48).

The return, however, of their relatively new bishop, John Hughes, both energized and united the disorganized body of Catholics. Hughes

had been on a fundraising tour of Europe and upon arrival decided that a second more comprehensive petition should be submitted to the CC. During the summer of 1840, Hughes called a series of meetings in which he exhorted his people to stay united and demand their political and civil rights from the council. He also gave a public address explaining the Catholic position to New Yorkers and personally helped draft the second petition. In response, the PSS sent its own remonstrance while “the pastors and churches of the city’s MEC formed a committee of three to prepare a further remonstrance against the Catholic claim.” (Lannie 1968: 51-70). The Methodist remonstrance was also comprehensive and covered three main areas: the traditional argument against public funds for religious schools; the fear that the Roman Catholic Church would ultimately gain political control and join church and state together as in Europe; and scathing criticism of Hughes for refusing to consider “a book of extracts from the Bible” to be used in place of the KJB. On the second point, the Methodists were not alone as several new nativist political parties were also warning about the threat of Catholic domination (Bourne 1870: 199-201).

Since the CC felt this issue was so important, it held two days of hearings on October 29 and 30, 1840. As in the previous encounter, the three main issues were public funds for religious schools, the KJB, and the anti-Catholic textbooks. After addressing the question of public funds, Bishop Hughes presented two objections to the use of the KJB. First, he felt that the non-denominational approach to the Bible was too generalized since it aimed to be acceptable to all students. Moreover, he believed that the daily reading of the Bible without “note or comment” was dangerous for Catholic students since it lacked the Church’s interpretation and teaching. He also feared that this approach might lead some Catholic students to become Protestants or even “infidels” (Bourne, 1870: 288). In contrast, Dr. Bond, speaking for the Methodists, argued that reading a chapter of the Bible each day was designed only to teach the “purest morals in which all agree” (Bourne 1870: 270-271). Similarly, Nathan Bangs asserted that the Bible readings included only “general doctrines” that all Christians believed such as belief in “one Savior, the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins, regeneration of the heart by the Holy Spirit, justification by faith, and a future day of judgment” (Bourne 1870: 275).

More importantly, Bishop Hughes objected to the Protestant principle of “private interpretation” which he said had led to the formation of numerous Protestant churches. Moreover, Hughes reiterated that

“Catholics do not believe that God has vouchsafed the promise of the Holy Spirit to every individual, but that he has given His Spirit to teach the Church collectively, and to guide the Church, and therefore we do not receive as the Bible, except what the Church guarantees” (Bourne 1870: 290). In contrast, Dr. Bond pointed out that the PSS was willing to use a book of extracts from the Bible that some Catholic bishops in Ireland had proposed for use in their country although some other Catholic bishops had asked for the pope’s approval before consenting to use it. Bond noted that Bishop Hughes had not responded to that offer and speculated that he was waiting for the pope’s approval, too, and unable to make the decision himself. Bond felt that since this was an American issue, Bishop Hughes should be able to decide for himself and not depend on a “foreign power” (Bourne 1870: 263-4).

Catholic (Partial) Victory at the State Level

Predictably, three months after the hearing, in January 1841, the CC voted sixteen to one to reject the Catholic petition. Undeterred, and with the open support of Governor Seward, Bishop Hughes and the Catholic leadership sent a third petition to the state legislature. The PSS, too, sent a remonstrance defending their position. Once again, the petition was referred to a committee for study who also sought the opinion of John Spencer, the state superintendent of schools. Spencer also supported some kind of school reform in NYC. Due to its controversial nature, the bill was tabled until the following January (1842).

During the spring of 1842, the committee finally sent its recommendation to the state assembly who passed a version of it and sent it to the senate where it narrowly passed by a vote of thirteen to twelve. The law, however, did not permit public funds for Catholic schools and still permitted the reading of the KJB. At the same time, it put NYC under the statewide “district school system” thereby ending the monopoly of the PSS. Now, each NYC “ward,” or election district, would be treated as a separate “town” in which it would elect two commissioners and one inspector who would supervise its schools. In addition, the commissioners from every ward (seventeen in all) would form a citywide Board of Education (Burrows and Wallace 1999: 631).

Although seriously weakened, the Protestant establishment continued to fight to at least keep the KJB in the schools. It did this on two fronts. The first way was through the municipal elections. Even though

commissioners were now elected in each ward, “Protestant die-hards quickly won control of the new Board of Education and ruled that classroom reading from the KJB was not precluded by the ban on sectarianism” (Burrows and Wallace 1999: 631). Secondly, the formation of the ARP in 1842 in NYC reinforced the efforts of the Board of Education since along with its anti-immigration and anti-Catholic positions, its platform sought “to prevent the exclusion of the Bible from the use of schools” (1844: 8). Similarly, the ARP’s “Address of the General Executive Committee to the People of the United States” stated: “We believe the Holy Bible, without sectarian note or comment, to be a most proper and necessary book, as well as for our children as ourselves, and we are determined that they shall not be deprived of it, either in or out of school” (1845: 10). While the school issue was being debated in the state legislature and before the formation of the ARP, the Methodist weekly newspaper, the CAJ, published two politically tinged editorials condemning not only the Catholic political efforts but the Catholic Church itself.

Methodist Political Involvement (2): The *Christian Advocate and Journal* (1841)

The second way in which Methodists entered in the political arena was through two strongly worded anti-Catholic editorials. Since Dr. Bond was the editor and had been deeply involved in the earlier CC effort, it seems quite probable that he also wrote these strongly worded editorials. The first editorial, “The Romanists and Common Council of NY,” was published in the CAJ on February 3, 1841 just a few weeks after the CC had rejected the second Catholic petition. It began with praise for the CC for rejecting what it called “the most preposterous and absurd application” and condemnation for what it saw as Bishop Hughes’ political activism. For example, it referred to him as an “American agitator” and an “American O’Connell” referring to a nationalist politician in Ireland. Next, it warned that Catholics would try to get a majority of CC members elected at the next municipal election (in April) who would be favorable to their cause. The editorial lamented that it might be possible since many Protestants seemed uninterested or indifferent due to the high number of “nominal Protestants” and “infidels.” Therefore, it urged readers to vote only for those candidates who signed a “pledge” stating that they would support the PSS. More importantly, it argued that if NYC allowed public funds for Catholic schools, it would embolden Catholics in the other two large cities of Baltimore and

Philadelphia. Finally, after pointing out the danger of Protestant students attending Catholic colleges (a fairly common occurrence at this time), it concluded: "We are not sorry that the bishop has opened our eyes to our own folly in committing the education of our children to our enemies – enemies not only of our faith but of our civil institutions."

The second editorial in the CAJ, "Romanism in NY," appeared on November 10, 1841, just two months before the state legislature was to take up the Catholic petition again. This editorial went into even greater depth as to why Catholics should not get public money. The first reason was that the Catholics were asking for too much money. Based on the Irish population being twenty percent, Bishop Hughes had asked for thirty thousand dollars. This amount, however, was not fair since the Catholics, who were generally poorer, paid less in taxes and, therefore, should get less. Second, the editorial voiced concern about those Protestant minority children who would have to attend a majority Catholic school based on the neighborhood population. It warned that Protestant children "...might be inveigled or seduced by Jesuitical artifice, the superstitious dogmas and practices of Popery." Moreover, these children would be taught that they were heretics, "cursed by God and the church," and subject to punishment and even burning at the stake if the Catholics ever acquired total political control. Third, the editorial believed that Catholic and Protestant children should go to school together so that they could mix with each other so thereby becoming "useful citizens" through these "social associations." Moreover, Catholic students who attended the common schools could begin to think for themselves instead of relying on the pope's pronouncements. Finally, the editorial repeated the familiar concern that a Catholic political majority in America would most likely lead to the kind of persecution that had occurred in Europe. This is illustrated in the editorial's final sentence that "under their debasing superstition, they are as ready now as ever a Romanist populace were, before or since the Reformation, to shed the blood of Christian martyrs."

At the same time, not all Methodists believed that the church should involve itself in local politics, even if it was about the Bible. This is illustrated in the period leading up to the municipal elections in April 1842, about five months after the second editorial. Although the state legislature was poised to pass the bill placing NYC schools under the control of the state's "district school system," Protestant supporters of the PSS sought to elect candidates who would both repeal the new law, if possible, and retain the

KJB in the schools. An April 5, 1842 article in the *New York Evening Post*, a Democrat paper, entitled, "Politics in the Churches," described what it considered some questionable political activity that had occurred in three Methodist churches: Forsyth Street, Mulberry Street, and Greene Street. According to the article, notices had been read from the pulpits of these churches inviting members to a meeting to discuss "important business." These notices had come from members who supported the Whigs. At the subsequent meetings "a circular was read requesting that five persons be appointed a committee, to meet in convention this evening, at Constitution Hall, and there to make arrangements for the charter election of next week, with a view to prevent the choice of any candidate for the CC who is supposed to be in favor of a change in the Common School System." In addition, at one of the meetings, a member who was a Whig called for some Democrats to serve on this committee so as to divide the Democrats who usually supported the school changes. The article noted that the purpose of this convention was to elect a Whig majority to the CC; it also condemned the churches' political efforts as "a worse example of the profane union of church government with politics, than any we have had yet." At the same time, it praised the Methodists in those churches who "when they learned the objective of the meeting, they disapproved of it and withdrew. They hold that the church should not thrust herself into ward meetings nor distribute votes at the polls." Despite this minority view, exactly two years later, in April 1844, the Methodists took control of the highest municipal office with the stated intention of retaining the Bible in the schools.

Methodist Political Involvement (3): A Pro-Bible Methodist Mayor (1844-1845)

The third way that Methodists entered the political arena was through the election of James Harper, a dedicated Methodist and publisher, who was an uncompromising supporter of the KJB. To be sure, Harper was a total political newcomer as he had never sought office before but felt public service was a duty he could not shirk if asked. As the April 1844, municipal elections drew near, the ARP nominating committee met with him and offered him the nomination. He had much to commend himself to their party. His credentials included membership in the "Order of United Americans," successful businessman, evangelical Christian, and rigid moralist who opposed drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Moreover, these qualities would strongly appeal to the ARP's constituency of

merchants, ship makers, tradesmen, and shopkeepers who were dissatisfied with both Democrats and Whigs. The election results validated their choice as Harper outpolled the LocoFoco candidate (a more radical working class party) by twenty-four thousand six hundred six to twenty thousand seven hundred twenty six. The Whig candidate received slightly more than five thousand votes. A man of his word, in his short victory speech Harper vowed to carry out his responsibilities as mayor “in conformity with the principles of our party” (Harper Papers; Burrows and Wallace 1999: 632; Caliendo 2010: 399).

During the mayor’s one year tenure, it does not seem likely that Mayor Harper and Bishop Hughes had any direct personal contact although the bishop attempted at least twice to communicate his concerns to the mayor. The first instance occurred in early May 1844, just after Mayor Harper had been elected but before he began his term. During this time, riots had occurred in Philadelphia between nativists and Irish Catholic immigrants. Several people on both sides had been killed and two Catholic churches had been destroyed. A nativist delegation from Philadelphia was planning to come to NYC to join forces with the nativists in Manhattan and parade through part of the city trying to provoke a riot with the Irish Catholics. Before the day of the planned rally, Bishop Hughes called upon the outgoing mayor, Robert Morris, a Democrat. Bishop Hughes warned him of the potential for violence and advised him to call out the militia. In addition, he gave Mayor Morris the following advice: “Moreover, I should send to Mr. Harper, the mayor-elect who has been chosen by the votes of this party (i.e., the APR). I should remind him that these men are his supporters; I should warn him that if they carry out their design, there will be a riot; and I should urge him to use his influence in preventing this public reception of the (Philadelphia) delegates.” It is unknown if Morris contacted Harper, but the leaders called off the rally and violence was averted (Hassard, 278).

The second interaction occurred just a few weeks later when Bishop Hughes sent a long letter (it was later published in pamphlet form) addressed to Mayor Harper but published (!) in *The Courier and Enquirer* on May 20, 1844. The letter, which was entitled, “On the Moral Causes That Have Produced the Evil Spirit of the Times,” attempted to do three things: vindicate his involvement in the school issue, attack the editors of two pro-Protestant papers, and put Mayor Harper “on notice” or even rebuke or warn him because of his association with the ARP. To be sure, Bishop Hughes viewed the ARP basically as an outgrowth of the intense

anti-Catholic feeling since the controversial Carroll Hall meeting on October 29, 1841, which he blamed on the combination of two factors: sermons and editorials. In his letter, Hughes asserted that many preachers “had entertained their congregations with political sermons on the school question for months before – so also for months after. Whatever might be the text from the Bible, the abuse of the Catholic religion, under the nickname of popery, together with all the slang, and all the calumnies furnished by the New York Herald, the Commercial Advertiser, the Journal of Commerce, and other papers of that stamp, was sure to make up the body of the sermon.” Hughes believed that these repeated assaults had “birthed” the ARP in 1842. Again, he asserted: “By this process the minds of the people were excited, their passions inflamed, their credulity imposed upon, and their confidence perverted. Then came the new party. It is impossible that the training of the pulpits should not have predisposed a large number of persons to join in the movement, which they had been taught to believe as a duty of their religion...Sir, I think I shall be able to prove to you, that these slanders, originating in Bennett’s Herald, the Commercial Advertiser, the New York Sun...repeated, embellished and evangelized from many of the pulpits of the City...forming the staple of political excitement, in the association which placed you in the honorable chair you enjoy.”

Although Mayor Harper did not respond publicly to Bishop Hughes’ measured warning about his party, at least two newspapers rose to his defense. For example, the May 22, 1844 edition of the Journal of Commerce chided Bishop Hughes both for deriding the aims and energy of the new party and also for failing to even offer him congratulations on his victory. In a gently sarcastic admonishment, the paper stated: “Considering that the letter was addressed to the Mayor, some little forbearance might have been expected toward the great movement, which overturning everything in its way, has just placed his Honor in the chair. Gentlemanly courtesy, to say nothing of all the Christian graces, of which the bishop is so conscious, requires this.”

James Gordon Bennett also took Bishop Hughes to task in his usual “go for the jugular” way. His immediate response listed three reasons. First, Bennett blamed Hughes for the ARP since he had first injected himself into politics at the Carroll Hall meeting. Bennett mentioned that his editorial the day after the meeting (in 1841) had labeled Hughes a “political agitator” and asserted that this action “has been, not the sole, but one of the chiefest of the causes which have produced the origin of the ARP, and the introduction of

religious animosities into politics.” Moreover, Bennett feared that Hughes’ involvement would lead to two new political parties along religious lines. Second, Bennett felt that, although the ARP had initially been too extremist, it had settled down considerably in the past two years. In the May 22, 1844 edition of the Herald, he assured readers that “the violent, proscriptive, and intolerant declarations of the ‘Native Americans’ are no longer poured forth in this city. The true...ground of the party is now discerned and occupied by its intelligent and influential members. And the excellent message of Mayor Harper assumes this ground and no other. The achievement of city reform – a just and righteous administration of the laws – fidelity in all respects to the Constitution – these are the great principles on which the new CC declare they intend to act.” Finally, Bennett believed that although Harper ran on the ARP ticket, he was a principled man who would not deliberately harm the Catholic population. For example, he related the story of how Mayor Harper had received anonymous letters asking him as a “nativist” and a Protestant to fire one of his female employees who was Catholic. Instead, he promoted her.

In sum, it is not known if the bishop and the mayor had any direct personal contact during his one-year term. The mayor was extremely busy with his mayoral duties and also with his publishing business in his spare moments. He did, however, take one action of immense importance to the school Bible cause: the appointment of Dr. David Reese, a fellow Methodist and close friend of Harper’s, to the position of superintendent of schools for the city and county of NYC on September 10, 1844.

Methodist Political Involvement (4): A Methodist Superintendent of Schools (1844-1845)

The final Methodist political intervention occurred during the energetic tenure of Dr. Reese. In just four short months, Reese made a strong case not only to the Board of Education but also to the general public for required Bible reading which had begun to lapse in certain ward schools since the state had begun to intervene. To his credit, Reese took an even-handed approach to the controversial issue. For example, he encouraged the use of the Douay Bible in schools where Catholics were a majority and, unlike other Protestant critics, did not accuse Bishop Hughes of trying to exclude the Bible from the schools (Hassard 1866: 280-281). Before describing his efforts, it is necessary to relate what had occurred from April 1842, to September 1844, when Reese was appointed.

Although the state law had been passed in May 1842, protests and counter protests had followed. For example, on April 11, 1842, in an apparent defensive measure, the Protestant-majority Board of Education had passed a resolution stating, “no school in which any religious or sectarian doctrine or tenet was taught should receive any portion of the school moneys to be distributed by this act.” It was aimed at perceived Catholic efforts to get public funds but Bishop Hughes interpreted it as referring to Bible reading since, in his opinion, reading the “Bible was teaching a sectarian doctrine and therefore” he “demanded that the schools in which it was read should not be included” in the funding. In response, Colonel William L. Stone, a Presbyterian, a longtime member of the School Commission and current superintendent of schools, opposed Hughes’ interpretation and the two of them carried on a “public discussion,” probably in the press, for some time. Agreeing with Stone, the Board of Education amended its earlier resolution on November 13, 1844, stating that “the Bible, without note or comment, is not a sectarian book, and that the reading of a portion of the Scriptures without note or comment, at the opening of the schools, is not inculcating or practicing any religious or sectarian doctrine or tenet of any particular Christian or other religious sect.” It was into this turbulent and uncertain new situation that Reese made his argument for reading the Bible in the schools and also urged political action to ensure it (Stone 1868: 507-509).

First, Reese published a pamphlet in October just before the November state elections based on his visitation of the seventeen wards entitled, “To the Board of Education for the City and County of New York – Bible or No Bible! That is the Question.” First, he noted the decline of Bible reading in the city’s schools. He cited the example of the two commissioners in the Catholic-majority fourteenth ward who had issued a resolution on April 6, 1843 that the Catholic Douay Bible and the KJB were to be read on alternate days. Yet, a month later, they verbally told the teachers that the Bible was “sectarian” and that Bible reading was to stop. Reese also noted that the second resolution was never recorded in the minute book while the first was contained in the minute book. Five other wards – the first, fourth, sixth (another Catholic-majority ward), eleventh, and twelfth – had followed their example. Reese condemned this action as not only in defiance of his authority but also a gross misinterpretation of the existing state law that permitted Bible reading. He called on the Board of Education to condemn this action and “recommend the use of the Holy Scriptures, without note or comment, in all the schools of the city and the

county” since the Protestant founders of the schools and current parents of the students both wanted the scriptures used. In addition, he reminded them that they had petitioned the state legislature that ward commissioners “shall not be authorized to exclude the Holy Scriptures, without note or comment, or any selections (i.e., textbooks) therefrom, from any one of the schools.” Finally, in a more political vein, he urged his hearers to elect only persons who supported the Bible reading in the schools (1845: 1-6).

Reese’s second effort to shore up political support for the Bible issue occurred in his Christmas afternoon address at the Broadway Tabernacle entitled, “Address on Behalf of the Bible in the Schools,” with Mayor Harper in attendance. First, he again summed up the current situation: Bible reading occurred in three quarters of all schools but not in four wards which included a student population of two to three thousand. He attributed the absence to two factors: Roman Catholic parents who opposed the KJB and anti-Bible parents who saw the Bible as just an ordinary book. Again, he faulted the Board of Education for lacking the resolve to force these schools to include Bible reading. Another concern was that these four ward commissioners had persuaded the Board of Education to still grant them funds to run their schools. Moreover, these ward commissioners had criticized Reese for being “politically motivated.” In response, Reese mentioned that the law permitted “moral and literary” training since the aim of the public schools was not only to educate its youth but also to unify the country. Indeed, Reese argued that the non-sectarian use of the Bible facilitated this since it taught universal morals rather than sectarian doctrine. At the same time, Reese acknowledged that the recent education laws had transferred power from the superintendent to the seventeen ward commissioners making his job more difficult. Nevertheless, he planned to enforce the existing law or cut off their funding. He was ultimately unsuccessful since the Board of Education ruled that he did not have the authority to make Bible reading compulsory (1845: 1-8). Despite his valiant efforts, a new state law (and successful lawsuits) eventually forbade all Bible reading further secularizing the city’s schools.

The Puzzle of Methodist Leadership

Although several other clergy from different denominations spoke at the CC’s hearing in 1840 and also gave addresses in support of the KJB in their own churches, it is abundantly clear that the Methodists were uniquely positioned to take the undisputed leading role. In the four years, from 1840

to 1844, highly accomplished pastoral and professional Methodists and their church members strove mightily in what eventually turned out to be a losing cause. But, the question remains: Why did the Methodists and not one of the other longer-established denominations take the lead?

Three answers seem possible. The first answer is its sheer size. For example, by the 1840s, the MEC in NYC may have been the largest or one of the largest “newer” denominations. From just three churches in 1800, it had grown to thirteen churches in two circuits. Second, the MEC still retained a high degree of evangelical fervor, which manifested itself in the emphasis on personal conversion, class meetings, and revival meetings. This evangelical fervor would have naturally supported Bible reading in the schools as a way of reinforcing what was taught in the home (often through family prayer) and in their churches. This is illustrated in the 1841 CAJ editorials which lamented the lack of support for the Bible issue from “timid Protestants,” “nominal Protestants,” and “religious indifferentism.” To be sure, the other denominations such as the Episcopal Church had their “evangelical wing” but the Methodists always seemed to be at “fever pitch” when it came to presenting and defending the message of the Gospel. Moreover, some of the older Protestant churches had begun to “liberalize” which led them to focus more on social reform issues such as abolitionism.

Finally, and most importantly, NYC was headquarters for practically all of the national Methodist institutions such as the Mission Society, the Tract Society, and the formidable Book Concern. The location of the Book Concern was especially significant since its highly educated and articulate editors of both the CAJ and the MQR were stationed in Manhattan. This significance was apparent when the MEC appointed two current editors, Dr. Bond and Rev. Peck, and a former editor, Nathan Bangs, to the committee to draft the remonstrance to the Common Council in the fall of 1840. To be sure, these men brought impressive credentials to the debate. For example, Dr. Bond was not only an eminent physician who had been offered a medical professorship, but was also well read in both the English and classical authors. On the pastoral side, he was a local preacher, an author of two apologetic works, and past editor of *The Itinerant*, a Baltimore church periodical which supported traditional Methodist doctrine and polity. Reverend George Peck also had a distinguished background: presiding elder on two separate occasions, author of several theological treatises including “*Scriptural Doctrine of Christian Perfection*,” and principal of the Oneida (New York) Conference Seminary. Finally, Nathan Bangs had been

a missionary to Canada, presiding elder, General Conference delegate, and the previous editor of both the CAJ and the MQR. These were seasoned veterans who had preached, defended, and articulated the faith. Since the most controversial national issues such as African colonization, abolition, and the administration of public schools were often fought first in NYC, the Methodists had their top spokesmen, both lay and clergy, securely in place (Simpson 1878: 85-86, 226, 698).

The Inability to Compromise

In addition to the puzzling question of the Methodists' fervent and unrelenting political pressure, another question comes to mind: "How is it that a compromise on the issues could not be reached?" Why couldn't both sides yield somewhat so that both Catholic and PSS-MEC concerns be accommodated? Since we are so used to living in an "ecumenical age" after the Second Vatican Council, we have to ponder more deeply the radically different realities, hopes and fears of 1840s NYC. Four factors seem to explain this complete intransigence, deep mistrust, and mutual hostility.

First, the question of public funds for a denominational school seemed to the Protestant majority a long-settled issue. The PSS and others argued that if one denomination received school funds that it would open the door to all denominations receiving funds. Moreover, state and federal constitutions had explicitly sought to keep the church and the state separate. In contrast, Bishop Hughes believed it was only fair that Catholics who were taxed should receive some benefit from it. Today, that would be analogous to a "tax voucher" for parents who send their children to a private or religious school which some states now see as reasonable. To be sure, in our 21st century pluralistic society, tax vouchers, although a reasonable compromise, are still resisted by a majority of states revealing an enduring antipathy to supporting private or religious schools with public funds. Of course, American public schools today do not have the overt anti-Catholic and pro-Protestant textbooks and condescending attitudes of the teachers. Sadly, no such compromise on funding could be achieved in the 1840s as the persistent Catholic political efforts only led to mob behavior on both sides and extremely vicious attacks on Bishop Hughes in the press. Although Bishop Hughes hoped that American democratic principles and processes would overcome deep-seated prejudices, it was clearly the wrong time and place. Similarly, in his analysis of the public funding issue, Vincent Lannie has written, "...regardless of the defects of

the PSS and the validity of certain Catholic charges, the Catholic position seemed sectarian, unconstitutional, and un-American to the majority of the citizens of that day” (1968: 101).

Secondly, Bishop Hughes was unwilling to compromise on the Bible and textbook issues, which could have at least provided a temporary solution while the state government worked out the details. Predictably, this refusal both frustrated and angered the PSS and its supporters. This refusal to compromise was illustrated at the 1840 hearing. Thomas Sedgwick, one of the two PSS lawyers to speak, suggested that the schools use a book of extracts from the Bible that had recently been approved for use in Ireland although some dissenting bishops had asked for the pope’s approval before using it. The following day, at the second hearing, Dr. Bond suggested that Bishop Hughes’ silence so far was due to his dependence on what the “foreign power” (i.e., the pope) would say. Although it is not clear how the pope eventually ruled, if he did so at all, Bishop Hughes refused to even consider that suggestion.

Bishop Hughes also rejected the sensible offer of the PSS to revise their textbooks to eliminate any anti-Catholic bias. Bishop Hughes had apparently indicated a willingness to consider their proposal but after they sent him a number of problematic books, he refused to even review them to the consternation of the PSS. In an address, he gave his reasoning: “As if we have nothing to do but to mark out a passage and it will disappear! Are we to take the odium of erasing passages which you hold to be true? And have you any right to make such an offer? If we spend the necessary time in reviewing the books to discover offensive passages, you give us no pledge that you will even then remove the objectionable matter. After all our troubles, you may remove it or not as you see fit” (Hassard 1866: 238). This is all the more surprising since, at one point, Catholic representatives had indicated their own willingness to make concessions such as allowing the PSS to examine their potential teachers, allowing state officials to inspect their schools and textbooks, teaching Catholic doctrine only after school hours, and avoiding criticism of other denominations. In sum, while reasonable people on both sides were willing to put aside their differences, Bishop Hughes apparently only wanted one thing: separate “Catholic public schools” (Hassard 1866: 238-239; Lannie 1968: 112-117).

The third factor that doomed compromise was the depth of mistrust, hostility, and bitterness that many Protestants, including the Methodists, felt toward the Catholic Church despite Bishop Hughes’ assurances to the

contrary. For example, at the October 1840, hearing, Dr. Bond sharply criticized the Catholic Church for its persecution of Protestants in Europe. In addition, his speech was filled with sarcasm and accusations. Similarly, Hassard noted, “the remonstrance of the Methodists was expressed with a great deal of temper and bristled with sharp epithets” (1866: 235). Put on the defensive at the hearing, Bishop Hughes tried to be conciliatory but also lapsed into sarcasm as well. Later, in an address at a mass meeting of Catholics, he expressed his frustration that the Protestant speakers had ignored the funding issue in order to disparage the Catholic Church. In his address, he said, “No, but the Reverend Dr. Spring, and the Reverend Dr. Bond, and the Reverend Dr. Bangs and company came with an old volume of antiquated theology and exclaimed, ‘What monstrous people these papists are!’ The CC heard them and instead of examining the facts in which the rights of their constituents are involved, entered on the consideration of abstract theological reasoning” (Hassard, 1866: 239). Richard Shaw, however, blamed both sides for the inability to compromise. Referring also to the October 1840, hearing, he wrote: “The frustrating element of the whole debate was that neither side seemed capable of understanding the limits of their own prejudice or of properly addressing the prejudice of the other...What the arguments did present was a potpourri of the religious antagonisms between native and new-immigrant America” (1977: 147).

Finally, the nativist parties included Bible reading in the public schools as one of their major issues along with anti-immigration, which ensured an even deeper polarization. As Irish Catholic immigration increased, nativists feared they would be more loyal to the pope than to American political institutions. In addition, they feared that a future Catholic majority would persecute Protestants as had happened in Europe. Although Bishop Hughes had raised some good points regarding the civil rights of Catholics, he was facing an avalanche of nativist opposition of which the school issue was just one issue among many. Given the tense political climate of the 1840s, moderating some of his school positions might have won him some Protestant friends instead of earning their enduring hatred.

Conclusion

To sum up, after the PSS itself, the MEC in NYC involved itself in a spectacularly overt political way to fight a Catholic-Democrat political alliance which sought to change the way common schools were administered

and, in particular, to eliminate the daily reading of the KJB. This deeper insight of Methodist involvement in one of the great national issues of the day has great significance since it adds more support to the hypothesis that early American Methodism, with its fervent evangelical approach still intact, tended to take politically conservative positions. Some of these included support for nativist political parties, anti-immigration policies (especially against Irish Catholic immigration), African colonization, and opposition to abolition, which was seen as too extreme and divisive. Thus, a majority of early American Methodism, including its leadership and periodicals, can deservedly be seen as the “conservative evangelicals” and the “religious right” of its time.

Yet, more research into Methodism’s social, cultural, and political role needs to be done. One possibility is an examination of Methodist involvement in the school issue in Philadelphia and Baltimore, the other two large cities of the time. Both cities struggled with the issue and the Baltimore conference issued a resolution supporting school Bible reading. Another area to explore would be the political affiliations of Methodists in NYC and elsewhere. It would be helpful to know what percentage were members of the various parties such as the Whig, Democrat, LocoFoco, Abolition, and American Republican Party and if that caused division in the local churches (mainly but not only between the business and working classes) and in the conference which often dealt with these “political” issues. The 1830s and 1840s were a particularly volatile period in American history and many riots over various matters occurred in NYC and other major cities. These in-depth studies will provide a more comprehensive and much-needed understanding of Methodism’s socio-political impact on the early American republic.

A Chronology of the Bible Issue

- 1805 Free School Society (later, Public School Society) organizes free schools for the poor
- 1824 Public funds for denominational “free schools” ended
- 1840 PSS administers one hundred “common schools” in New York City
- March 12, 1840 Roman Catholic Church petitions CC for funds for eight Catholic schools
- April 27, 1840 Board of Aldermen reject Catholic petition by sixteen to one vote
- Sept. 1840 Bishop Hughes sends second petition to CC for funds

- Oct. 29-30, 1840 Common Council holds two day open hearing on petition
- January 1841 Governor Seward again calls for NYC school reform
- Jan. 11, 1841 CC rejects second Catholic petition for school funds (15-1)
- February 1841 Bishop Hughes sends petition for funds to state legislature
- April 1841 Spencer recommends elected education commissioners for each ward in NYC
- Nov. 3, 1841 Democrats in NYC win state assembly and senate seats
- January 1842 State assembly takes up education issue
- April 1842 School reform bill passes. NYC placed under state's "district school system"
- April 12, 1842 Nativists attack Irish neighborhood and St. Patrick's after municipal elections
- April 1844 James Harper, a Methodist, elected mayor of NYC (one year term)
- Sept. 10, 1844 Harper appointed Dr. David M. Reese as Superintendent of Schools
- Oct. 1844 Dr. Reese's pamphlet, "Bible or No Bible! That is the Question," is published
- Dec. 25, 1844 Dr. Reese's gives "Address in Behalf of the Bible in the Schools"
- April 1845 Democrat candidate defeats James Harper in mayoral election
- 1853 Public School Society ceases existence



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