

Adoption in Ontario: An Agnostic's Position

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The state should not be required to make odious and invidious comparisons, it should not have to say to one little child that it must give up the prospect of the real warmth and love of a real home and accept the second best of an impersonal institution or what is even worse the "pillar-to-post" existence of a foster child because some articulate pressure group has decreed that its own interests, perfectly valid and legitimate in their proper place and sphere, dictates that it must be so; while the state says to another child "you may have a home, loved ones, warmth, love and acceptance."

It is submitted that by leaving to Caesar²⁴ the things that are properly his concern and to God's followers those matters that rightly fall within that realm, respect for law will grow and recognition of the valid claims of conscience will rest on a more secure foundation, at no cost to the essential well-being of the adoptable child.

(2) Adoption in Ontario: An Agnostic's Position

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Atheists and Agnostics can adopt children in this province by means of private placement. Private placement properly done is a good and necessary service, but it has some disadvantages. There is a lack of the skilled counseling that may be required by both the adopting couple and the natural parents; the expense is greater and it remains difficult to find a lawyer or doctor willing to engage in placement. It is desirable that as many adoptions as possible be handled by social service agencies. Private placement should always be available to those who want it. It should not be, as it is today, obligatory for certain groups of the population who want to adopt children.

To experience discrimination is always disturbing. It is all the more upsetting when it comes first in adult life and is directed against you not because of what you are or what you believe, but rather because of what you are called. This is the form that religious discrimination takes under the present system of agency adoption.

My husband and I were told we could not apply to the Children's Aid Society for a child because we call ourselves Agnostics. It was implied by the worker we saw that our application would be accepted if we returned after a few months with a more acceptable religious denomination. "Unitarianism", she said, "is now considered a Protestant religion for purposes of adoption."

²⁴ HOLY BIBLE, Revised Standard Version, Matthew 22:21.

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From this interview we gained the impression that the worker herself could not have cared less what religion we were or weren't and that a minimal degree of participation in a religion was acceptable to the agency. The suggestion here, that religion can be used for reasons of personal gain is shocking in the extreme and clearly points up the artificial state of affairs that presently exists.

Atheists and Agnostics are popularly associated with sin and immorality. This stereotype provides a rationalization for actions of discrimination. The real reason for discrimination in this case is not the Agnostic's lack of belief in a major religion, and no one seriously considers him to be immoral or even amoral. The reason is fear. The church-goer's faith in his religion and his knowledge of it is so limited as to make him unable to defend his beliefs intellectually, even to himself. He is, to put it figuratively, afraid of losing his security blanket. This is why he supports a system which discriminates against those who are not religious in his own limited sense.

The Child Welfare Act makes no mention of religion.¹ The Children's Aid Societies are private sectarian agencies which receive grants of money from the municipal and provincial governments. None of these agencies will accept an Atheist or Agnostic couple as adoptive parents.² Indeed, the Peel County C.A.S. recently refused a couple because only one of them was an Atheist.

There is a large group of children who are hard to place in suitable homes because of their age, race, physical or mental handicaps. This group is so large, in fact, that the Department of Public Welfare advertises in the newspapers in an attempt to find homes for them. Until very recently there was another group of children not likely to be adopted simply because they were Catholic.

Everyone will admit that love is necessary for the development of the total personality—the "self" or the "soul" of the individual. To a child this unselfish emotion comes first from a permanent parent-figure—someone who is always there and always loving. If we deprive a young child of this love for any period of time, he will lose his capacity to return it and will never have even the potential of experiencing a close relationship with another person. How can such a person begin to understand the love of an invisible Supreme Being? He cannot conceive of this special love because he has never experienced even the love of quite visible, fallible human beings. Yet children are kept from the families who could give them love so that they may receive instruction in the religion of their parents—parents who, whatever their reasons (and usually they are very compelling ones) have given their child away. This is all done in order

¹ *Supra*, p. 16-17.

² This was written prior to the announcement by the Metropolitan Toronto Children's Aid Society.

to save the "souls" of such children, but does it not rob them of their souls instead?

Great efforts are made to place all children in a suitable environment. No child is kept in an institution if a suitable foster home is available. No child is moved from one foster home to another without good reason. But some children are kept from adoptive homes simply because an accident of birth puts a wall of religious difference between them and two people who would love and cherish them.

Every effort should certainly be made to place a child in accordance with the wishes of his natural parents but where such wishes cannot be met within a reasonable period of time, they should be disregarded so that the rights of the child to a proper home can be guaranteed.

The charge is often made that non-religious people would bring up a child with no moral or ethical values. This is no more true than that every Christian or Jewish child grows up completely moral and with a firm and broad knowledge of his religion. If we consider morality a necessary fact of life, since we must live in cooperation with one another or perish as individuals and as a species, then, to cooperate we must deal with other men as equals and we must respect others as we respect our own selves.

Most of us, religious or not, base our system of ethics and our code of morals on this concept of love for our fellow men. This philosophy cannot be taught to children who have never known a sustaining, continuous and undemanding love. Luckily most children brought up in orphanages and foster homes manage to lead relatively normal lives as adults. They have all, however, been injured to some degree by the lack of the love and guidance of a permanent set of parents.

Most non-religious people believe that all men are deserving of respect and tolerance. Most of them, for this reason, respect those who do have a belief in God. Surely a child brought up by such people would be a moral person whatever his religion.

Those of us who predicate our moral conduct on the principle that we are secular people in a secular world have a hard task in the education of our children, for our teaching of ethics and morality must be founded in our daily life, and has no place for teaching based in any way on fear of punishment. We must teach by example and we must formulate reasons for our behavior that are valid in the context of the world we live in every day, not a world we get stray glimpses of once a week. If we are concerned with giving our children a full understanding of the society they live in, we must also teach them as much as possible about all the major religions. There are, of course, some people who are actively and fanatically against religion. They are, most fortunately, a very small minority. There is no more danger that a social worker would place a child with such a couple than that she would place a child with religious fanatics.

I dislike discrimination which prevents me from using the facilities of an agency supported by the taxes I pay. I object to the hypocrisy of a system which says on the one hand that I am unfit to be a parent because I have no formal religion, while on the other hand children are placed with couples whose religious affiliation is nominal only and in some cases may be assumed for the purposes of adoption.

The situation resolves itself into two main problems; first, elimination of the religious barriers to adoption which now exist against Atheists and Agnostics; second, finding homes for children who are hard to place. When we consider this problem we must take into consideration that at present the rights of Roman Catholics to handle their own adoptions is recognized.³

There are several possible solutions to the problem. The one most often proposed is the one most likely to meet with strong opposition. It is that all adoptions be handled in a non-sectarian manner. This raises another problem. Roman Catholics feel that they are obliged to raise their children in the Catholic faith. A completely non-sectarian approach to adoption would disregard this and would discriminate against them by so doing. For a plan to be workable every consideration must be made to protect those privileges which already apply to Catholics. On the other hand, we cannot allow children to remain unadopted for long periods of time because of the religious beliefs of their parents, any more than we permit a child of Jehovah's Witness parentage to die for lack of blood. In both cases, religion acts against the welfare of the child.

A second solution is that a non-sectarian agency be set up. This would do little towards helping find homes for the hard-to-place children that already exist, and while it is an obvious answer to the problem of religious discrimination, it would be difficult to execute because of the great shortage of both money and staff. The existing agencies are short of both as it is.

A third solution, perhaps the most workable, is to allow within the present Protestant Children's Aid, adoption by Agnostic and Atheist couples of those children whose natural parents are Agnostic or Atheist or have no preferences regarding the religious upbringing of their children.⁴ Under such a system, every effort would be made to place a child in a family of the same religion, but where this was not possible, religion would be disregarded.

The problem of Catholic children who remain unplaced would still remain. It must be remembered that it is the total welfare of the child which is important, not only its religious training. With this in mind, would it not be reasonable to allow inter-religious adoption of Catholic children if, after a certain period of time, no

³ This probably refers to the existence of Catholic Children's Aid Societies.

⁴ This solution has in fact now been adopted in Metropolitan Toronto.