

# Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



## Re-imaging the Moral Order of Urban Space: Religion and Photography in Winnipeg, 1900-1914

James Opp

Volume 13, numéro 1, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031154ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/031154ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Opp, J. (2002). Re-imaging the Moral Order of Urban Space: Religion and Photography in Winnipeg, 1900-1914. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 13(1), 73-93.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/031154ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Au moment où le révérend JS. Woodsworth est nommé directeur de la All Peoples' Mission de Winnipeg en 1907, de nombreuses publications méthodistes canadiennes modifient leur contenu visuel pour montrer l'espace urbain sous un autre angle. Aux côtés des traditionnelles photographies d'églises et de ministres apparaissent bientôt des images de logements surpeuplés, de personnes vivant dans la pauvreté et d'enfants laissés à eux-mêmes dans la rue. James Opp traite ici de l'utilisation de la photographie comme outil de documentation sociale ; il regarde comment ces images s'inscrivent dans le contexte de l'apparition d'un nouvel évangile social et quels rôles elles jouent auprès de la classe moyenne, que le « problème » urbain inquiète largement. Les tenants de la nouvelle réforme sociale avaient recours à la photographie pour documenter leurs enquêtes sur les conditions sociales. On prétendait que la photographie pouvait représenter objectivement la réalité, mais c'était oublier que cette objectivité s'exprimait à l'intérieur d'un cadre délimité par les principes de la moralité sexuelle, particulièrement celle concernant le corps des enfants. Ce renouveau illustré de l'espace urbain s'insère dans le discours religieux de l'époque, qui présentait le « problème » de la ville comme un problème d'ordre moral et environnemental.

## Re-imagining the Moral Order of Urban Space: Religion and Photography in Winnipeg, 1900-1914<sup>1</sup>

JAMES OPP

When the Methodist minister J.S. Woodsworth published his first book, *Strangers within our Gates*, in 1909, the “problem” of the city took up one small chapter. By 1911, however, the city formed the main topic of his second book, *My Neighbor*, reflecting the growing sense of urgency over the new urban space created by the rapid expansion of Canadian cities: “As we penetrate more deeply into [the city’s] life, we discover evils of which we had hardly dreamed.... We get behind the scenes; we see the seamy side. We look beneath the glittering surface and shrink back from the hidden depths which the yawning darkness suggests.”<sup>2</sup> Addressing the social conditions of the city required a new way of “seeing” the “seamy side” of life “behind the scenes.” By the twentieth century, proponents of the social gospel such as Woodsworth had decided that the old methods of Christian charity work and a focus on individual salvation needed to be replaced with a collective approach that emphasised building the kingdom of God through new forms of social reform based on more scientific principles. To “penetrate” the darkness required not only moral courage and converted hearts, but data, statistics, and comprehensive city “surveys.”

The emergence of the social gospel marked an important transition in the visual metaphors employed by the Methodist Church in Canada. Mission work among the urban poor had traditionally been seen as the light of the gospel displacing the darkness within. But Woodsworth’s language in *My Neighbor* operated differently. Now the goal was to expose the darkness, to see through it in order to reveal its very existence. To observe the darkness was the first step towards producing a collective strategy of changing the environment. The act of seeing was in itself a “light,” and so it is not surprising that the language of the social gospel is overlaid with visual metaphors. The Reverend Hugh Dobson wrote that the church’s pursuit of “Social Service” involved two stages: the first, and “most vitally constructive,” was “to observe and set down and look squarely in the face of the facts of our social life”; the second was to

1 Financial support for this project was provided by a University of Lethbridge Research Fund Grant. The author wishes to thank Janet Friskney for her comments on early drafts of this work.

2 J.S. Woodsworth, *My Neighbor* (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1911), 22.

“establish and fix in reality the vision made visible by the preacher and evangelist, to build cities and plan towns and rural communities patterned after what they saw in the mount, and guided by the knowledge gained by the survey of facts.”<sup>3</sup> In a public recommendation for *My Neighbor*, the Reverend S.D. Chown made the same point, noting that the “fulness of knowledge displayed indicates intimateness of opportunity for study and observation and gives a satisfying sense of authority to the statements made. It is well that those who are at ease in our Canadian Zion should be made to see so clearly and forcibly how the ‘other half’ lives.”<sup>4</sup> Constructing the New Jerusalem upon a righteous moral order first required an accurate assessment and a visualisation of current conditions.

While the principles and theology of social reform have been studied, and the activities of social gossellers like J.S. Woodsworth have been detailed extensively, one area that remains to be explored is how the “modern” techniques of social reform entailed a new way of visualising urban space. In carrying out their appointed tasks, social reformers compiled statistics and constructed detailed charts and graphs, but one of the most powerful tools for re-visualising the city was photography. The social documentary style of photography had evolved from the startling exposés of Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which sensationalised New York slums, to a more “scientific” form in the hands of social reformers such as Lawrence Veiller, secretary of New York’s Charity Organization Society. Veiller incorporated more than 1,000 photographs in his famous Tenement-House Exhibit of 1899, and the power of photography to document social conditions was felt across North America as health departments started to develop their own photographic records.<sup>5</sup> Photography was incorporated into a 1911 study of Toronto’s slums by the city’s Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Charles Hastings, and it was prominent in Montreal’s Child Welfare Exhibit of 1912.

For Protestant reformers such as Woodsworth, photographs served an indispensable function in bringing the “real” conditions of the city to the public mind, creating visual reference points from which the new emphasis on a social gospel could be launched. In their extensive publishing efforts that

3 Toronto. United Church of Canada Archives (UCA), 73.102C, Methodist Church Department of Evangelism and Social Service papers, Box 1, File 2, Board of Temperance and Moral Reform, Annual Meeting, 21-22 October 1913.

4 S.D. Chown, “Introduction,” in *My Neighbor*, 6; see also *The Missionary Outlook* 31/8 (August 1911): 177.

5 As Alan Trachtenberg notes, the “documentary” label was applied retrospectively to the work of Lewis Hine and Walter Evans as a way to classify an aesthetic that appeared to be neither “art” nor purely journalistic in its intent. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 190-192. On the transition from Riis to Veiller, see Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 28-46.

incorporated photographs, Protestant churches in Canada played a key role in publicly framing the moral boundaries of the modern city. The Methodist Church in particular, through the efforts of the Young People's Forward Movement for Missions (YPFM), distributed photographs through multiple channels that included its own journals, photographic exhibitions, and lantern slide shows. The YPFM also served as the publisher for both of Woodsworth's books, each of them amply illustrated with photographs drawn from the YPFM's own files. Toronto and Montreal were both featured in the new social documentary style, but the city that attracted a disproportionate amount of attention from the Methodists was Woodsworth's own Winnipeg. As a rapidly growing metropolis, a centre for immigration, and a symbol of the future direction of Canada, Winnipeg embodied the potential dangers of urban growth across the country.

In focusing on the photographic representations of the City of Winnipeg in the published materials of the Methodist Church before the First World War, the purpose is not to assess the real conditions of urban poverty, but rather to analyse the transformation that occurred in visual representations of the city. Although historians have been far from reluctant to incorporate such images into their own books as illustrative material, there has been remarkably little analysis of the photographic medium and the relation between visual representation and social reform. While the choice and placement of photographs was the responsibility of a small group of editors, authors, and publishers, it is important not to underestimate their impact on the public perception of urban space. As Susan Sontag suggests, photographs "do not simply render reality – realistically. It is reality which is scrutinized, and evaluated, for its fidelity to photographs."<sup>6</sup> The increasing use of photography in the early twentieth century shaped a modern sense of vision, and these images offered particular narratives and realities that were difficult to ignore.<sup>7</sup>

The first decade of the twentieth century marked a definite shift in the visual strategy of representing the city. Photography was not a new technology, but photographic images were invested with a new authority, a power of scientific observation that exuded an "evidential force."<sup>8</sup> The appearance of documentary photographs of poverty and unsanitary living conditions in Canadian cities within the context of religious publications marked a conscious attempt to make "surveying" and "seeing" society a part of the work of social

---

6 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1977), 87.

7 On the relationship between photography and a "modern vision," see Suren Lalvani, *Photography, Vision, and the Production of Modern Bodies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

8 The phrase "evidential force" is Roland Barthes', but John Tagg takes the same notion in a different direction by pointing out that the "very idea of what constitutes evidence has a history." See John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays of Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 2.

redemption. And yet, while the value of photography lay in its dispassionate representation, such images were produced and read within a particular moral and spiritual context. To examine Methodist photographic representations of Winnipeg at the turn of the twentieth century is to witness a “re-imaging” of the moral boundaries and order of urban space.

### Picturing Religion

When the aspiring photographer Lewis B. Foote arrived in Winnipeg in 1901, his first foray into marketing his photographic skills was to take pictures of every single church in the city, superimpose the prints with portraits of the ministers, and then sell the pictures to the churches.<sup>9</sup> This photographic narrative, linking the visible landscape of religious institutions with portraits of those called to religious service, was the same framework for photographic illustrations used by the *Christian Guardian*, the official denominational journal of the Methodist Church of Canada, and other religious magazines in this period. Popularised in the 1890s, the half-tone printing process made the reproduction of photographs feasible, and pictures of churches and portraits of the ministers who served them dominated the visual imagery of religious journals, especially denominational organs such as the *Christian Guardian*. There were important exceptions to this pattern, however. Missionary pictures offered both similarities and differences to the standard photographic practices. For the most part, the focus remained upon heroic missionaries and the mission buildings constructed in foreign lands, but they also strayed into more scenic explorations of exotic landscapes. Occasionally, a direct moral commentary was offered to explain the intended meaning of photographs of subjects that lay, geographically and morally, outside of the church. For example, underneath a 1905 photograph of a “Vancouver Island Indian Home” in the *Christian Guardian*, the caption noted that its inhabitants had “grown old in paganism.”<sup>10</sup>

The *Guardian*’s use of photography increased noticeably in 1903 when it introduced a new format, transforming itself from a newspaper-style serial into a longer magazine with a smaller layout. With the shift, photographs became noticeably larger and more prominent. However, the role of photography remained the edification of the church and its ministers. In 1906, a photograph of Calgary’s Central Methodist Church was featured on the cover of the *Guardian*, with a caption underneath that read: “Completed February, 1905; seating capacity, nearly 2,000; cost, including furnishings and organ, \$75,000. Beginning at the very first, Methodism has been in Calgary only 23 years.”<sup>11</sup>

9 Doug Smith and Michael Olito, *The Best Possible Face: L. B. Foote's Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1985), 2-3.

10 *Christian Guardian* 76/40 (4 October 1905): 9.

11 *Ibid.*, 77/21 (23 May 1906): 1.

The spiritual health of the church found a direct corollary in the increasing number and size of stone monuments in the nation. Churches, especially large, new buildings in rapidly expanding parts of the country, represented growth, progress, and the post-millennial optimism that shaped Protestant thought at the turn of the century.

In 1907, the *Christian Guardian* devoted a special issue to the city of Winnipeg. The explosive growth of the Canadian prairies from the waves of immigration in the early years of the new century had quadrupled the size of Winnipeg; between 1901 and 1916 the city's population jumped from 45,000 to 187,000, making it Canada's third-largest city.<sup>12</sup> The *Guardian's* photographic representations offered visual confirmation of the expansion of the city and the fulfilment of its motto: "Commerce, Prudence, Industry." Banks, warehouses, department stores and the city hall all spoke to the material progress of Winnipeg, while the detailed history of Methodism was interwoven with photographs of the impressive churches that now stood as the monuments and confirmation of spiritual progress. For the moment, the public vision of building the kingdom of God was concentrated upon demonstrating that Methodist work was expanding in Winnipeg just as fast as the city itself.

The growth of the West, and Winnipeg in particular, was an important issue for Methodists. Membership in Anglican and Presbyterian churches was increasing at faster rates in the city and the region because of their direct links to the religious background of a greater proportion of recent British immigrants. Far fewer Methodists were emigrating, and many feared that Methodism would be left behind if the West fulfilled its growth potential.<sup>13</sup> The front-cover status of Calgary's Central Methodist Church and the interweaving of Methodist growth in Winnipeg with the expansion of the city itself assuaged anxieties that the Methodist church was in danger of losing its pre-eminent position as the dominant Protestant denomination in Canada.

The growth of the city itself, however, posed new social and spiritual problems. In its commemorative issue, the *Guardian* editorialised that Winnipeg could, by most accounts, be called a "great city." But at the same time, it cautioned that the "problem of the great city is one of the most serious that faces an enlightened civilization in this twentieth century."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in the same issue, the Reverend S.P. Rose warned that the religion of the city was different than the religion of the country because the city "demands of the Christian religion that it shall pre-eminently express and apply itself socially."

12 Paul Voisey, "The Urbanization of the Canadian Prairies, 1871-1916," *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 8 (1975): 84-85.

13 George Emery, *The Methodist Church on the Prairies, 1896-1914* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 104-125.

14 "Problems and Policies," *Christian Guardian* 78/14 (3 April 1907): 5.

It was not enough to lift people from despair, "their feet must be placed upon the rock. A purified environment must be found for the regenerated life."<sup>15</sup> Visually, however, photographs illustrating the particular social or spiritual problems of Winnipeg remained off the page. For the moment, the moral uplift of the city was directly connected to the ability of Methodists to raise impressive stone churches that matched the progress of the city itself.

The 1907 pictorial display coincided with an important shift within Winnipeg Methodism that would ultimately mark the beginning of a new photographic strategy. J.S. Woodsworth's arrival as the new superintendent of All Peoples' Mission in Winnipeg's North End heralded the introduction of a social documentary style that offered a very different visual representation of the city. On the verge of resigning from the ministry altogether, Woodsworth saw the superintendent's position as a perfect opportunity to engage in a more "practical" Christianity, and he dedicated himself to increasing the profile of the North End mission.<sup>16</sup> It was in the course of promoting this work that a new visual representation of the city emerged in Methodist publications. The photographic images produced during Woodsworth's tenure offered bleak assessments of conditions in the North End in the social documentary style; it was no longer a celebration of material progress.

In Winnipeg, L.B. Foote was the most prominent photographer that Woodsworth and other social reformers turned to for photographic evidence to document social conditions of the city. By this time, Foote had established himself as a freelance commercial photographer who supplied images to a variety of newspapers. Although he was familiar with the diversity of Winnipeg's population, Foote himself was no crusader in the mould of Riis or the child labour activist Lewis Hine, preferring to take pictures of visiting royalty than raise awareness of the North End. Nevertheless, it was Foote's work that made its way into the pages of the *Christian Guardian* in August 1908 as social reformers started to reshape the image of the city through documentary photography. In stark contrast to the prosperous, progressive images of Winnipeg laid before its readers only a year earlier, Foote's picture of the back of a double-

15 S.P. Rose, "The Religion of a Great City," *Christian Guardian* 78/14 (3 April 1907): 6.

16 Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau suggest that the threat to resign was not based on theological issues but was rather a "ploy" to secure the position at All Peoples' Mission. Unlike many of Woodsworth's biographers who characterise him as theologically radical, Christie and Gauvreau place him within a common intellectual tradition of mainstream Methodism, arguing that his theological doubts were the product of personal frustration and thwarted ambitions. See Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 8-12. In contrast, George Emery reasserts the radical position of Woodsworth, but claims that this was balanced by a mainstream evangelicalism that characterised most of the mission workers. See Emery, 147-150. Whether mainstream or radical, Woodsworth's ascendance certainly marked a shift at All Peoples' that was reflected in the realm of visual representation.

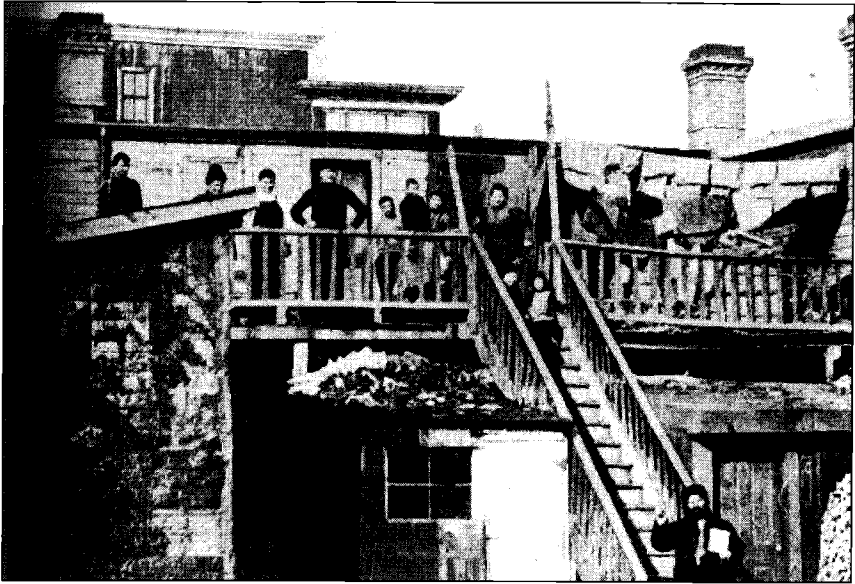


Figure 1. The back of a tenement house in Winnipeg. Photographer: L.B. Foote, c. 1908. Reprinted from J.S. Woodsworth, *Strangers within our Gates* (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1909), facing p. 262.

decker tenement house (Figure 1) marked the first time that a photographic representation of poor urban living conditions had been published in the magazine. The same image had accompanied a *Winnipeg Free Press* story a month earlier on "Social Settlement Work in Winnipeg," an article which Woodsworth saved for his scrapbook.<sup>17</sup>

The paucity of archival material leaves only speculation as to the actual relationship between Woodsworth and Foote. Even though a number of mission activities were documented photographically by Foote, there is no direct evidence that he was actually commissioned for this work. Woodsworth himself wrote nothing about photography, and was certainly not an innovator in adopting the social documentary style, which had already made significant inroads within the American social reform movement. Many of Foote's images of Winnipeg's North End appear to have been taken primarily for use in newspapers, and only later incorporated within Methodist magazines and books. Nevertheless, Woodsworth clearly embraced this new photographic strategy,

17 *Christian Guardian* 79/34 (19 August 1908): 9. The image was published the previous month in the *Free Press*. Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, J.S. Woodsworth fonds, Woodsworth Scrapbooks, newspaper clipping, "Social Settlement Work in Winnipeg," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 11 July 1908.





Figure 2. All Peoples' kindergarten class, Winnipeg. Writing on the image identifies the teachers as Annie Kelly and J.K. Lothrop. Photographer unknown, c. 1904. Winnipeg: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, No. N13261.

and put the images to use in many different places. The 1908 tenement-house picture was later re-published on the second page of All Peoples' Mission annual report and included as an illustration within Woodsworth's *Strangers within our Gates*.<sup>18</sup>

The introduction of a social documentary approach to photographic representations in Methodist publications was neither abrupt nor absolute. Traditional forms continued to dominate, and hybridised versions also emerged. Woodsworth may have wanted to make mission work more scientific in nature, but he still had to raise money and support for All Peoples' through publicity, and photography was an important avenue for demonstrating both the need and the work accomplished by the mission. Even prior to Woodsworth's arrival, photographs of All Peoples' had been printed, largely focusing upon the mission buildings and the types of classes and activities that occurred within. In 1905, an image published in the *Christian Guardian* (Figure 2) displayed a kindergarten class arranged outside of the mission.<sup>19</sup> The traditional progressive

18 NAC, J.S. Woodsworth fonds, Box 15.8, microfilm H-2278, *All Peoples' Mission, Winnipeg, Report, 1907-1908*. J.S. Woodsworth, *Strangers within our Gates* (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1909), facing p. 262.

19 *Christian Guardian* 76/40 (4 October 1905): 5.



Figure 3. A posed photograph of mission workers delivering Christmas hampers to a home in Winnipeg's North End. Photographer unknown, c.1910. Winnipeg: United Church of Canada Archives – Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Conference, J.M. Shaver fonds, PP53, No. 2484.

vision was confirmed in this representation by placing the class in front of the sign with the English phrase, "A House of Prayer for All Peoples," clearly visible, while the German text underneath was blocked from view. Assimilation through Canadianization was the goal of such educational efforts, and the bodies of the children are situated as vehicles for assimilation. Pictures of Sunday schools, kindergartens, and "fresh air" camps were visual images that spoke to the work of the mission itself, and reinforced the message that the hope for the future of Canada, and Methodism, lay in the children of immigrants.<sup>20</sup>

After 1907, however, the work of the mission was increasingly conceptualised as taking place not only within the mission building itself, but also in the homes of the North End, and film was used to capture this form of broader community outreach. For example, a series of images produced around 1910 documented the activities of All Peoples' in conducting Christmas charity drives and delivering baskets to the needy. One photograph (Figure 3) presents the exchange between the Mission and the North End as a personal interaction

20 For an even earlier image of All Peoples' Mission, and one that included signage in multiple languages, see *Christian Guardian* 70/30 (26 July 1899): 467.



Figure 4. A mission worker inside an immigrant family's store, Winnipeg. Photographer: Rev. James Woodsworth, 1911. Toronto: United Church of Canada / Victoria University Archives, Acc. No. 93.049P/2928N.

between a deaconess, helped by a boy, and a needy family who are receiving a Christmas basket. These pictures were a form of public appeal for the mission, an effort to demonstrate the concrete action being taken by its workers. The class lines are clearly distinguishable between the warmly clothed workers and the poor family, whose faces are marked by dirt. The picture is obviously posed, requiring the mother and children to step outside into the cold in order for the photograph to be taken. Published as part of the mission's 1911-1912 annual report with the simple caption, "Christmas Cheer,"<sup>21</sup> the family and location are not identified.

This type of documentation offered proof that mission workers were engaged in active, "practical" Christianity, and that the work of the mission was indeed reaching the poor. In their namelessness, the family on the step became the embodiment of poverty in Winnipeg's North End, a passive entity exposed by the camera to prove both the necessity of relief, and the ability of the

21 NAC, J.S. Woodsworth fonds, Box 15.8, microfilm H-2278, *Organized Helpfulness: All Peoples' Mission, 1911-1912*, 22.



Figure 5. A mission worker in the attic of a boarding house, Winnipeg. Photographer unknown, 1911. United Church of Canada / Victoria University Archives, Acc. No. 93.049P/2932N.

mission to deliver it. Figures 4 and 5 offer examples of a further extension of this strategy, with the mission worker placed as a heroic figure within the midst of exotic environments. Figure 4 shows the interior of a shop owned by an immigrant family, while Figure 5 has the same worker in the attic of a boarding house. In these images, the bodies of the immigrants have merged with their environment; in Figure 4, the people are barely distinguishable from their wares. Individual persons are even further obscured in Figure 5, as their bodily presence is restricted to the barely visible legs, offering a sense of closeness and crowded conditions even in the absence of corporeality.

Such photographs were useful for publicity purposes, but this portrayal of mission workers in action was actually quite rare. Figures 4 and 5 were unpublished images that were apparently commissioned or taken by Woodsworth to illustrate *My Neighbor*, but neither found its way into the book. The new photographic strategy of “surveying” existing conditions, such as the tenement house in Figure 1, relied upon an “objective” visual regime that required a detachment from the subject. To place mission workers in direct contact with slum dwellers within the frame implied subjectivity and personal connections.

The place of the scientific social worker was behind the camera, directing the view, gathering photographic exposures as a form of data, rather than being caught in front of it as a participant or an object of inquiry.

A parallel theological shift accompanied this changed photographic strategy. As the social gospel shifted attention away from individual salvation towards more collectivist approaches to building the kingdom of God, the camera similarly directed attention away from the individual subject and onto the environment that surrounded the body. Unlike the carefully documented pictures of churches and portraits of ministers, which offered a comprehensive, progressive narrative that drew image and text together, the new visual representations of Winnipeg's North End were largely disconnected from direct textual references, and their subjects were rarely identified by name. However, reproducing images of social conditions did not necessarily mark a secularisation of the Methodist urban vision as much as it created a new moral ordering of urban space. The presence of photographic images of the North End within religious publications drew an explicit connection between environment and salvation. As Rose wrote in his series of articles on religion and the city, the church should "intentionally set herself to the correction of specific abuses and evils, which threaten the well-being of modern civilisation, particularly in great centres of population." Through the teaching and living of the "truth," a "purifying atmosphere" could pervade the political, commercial, and social realms. In this way, "the truth of the Gospel pervades society, corrects its errors, and thus effects marvellous changes in the environment in which men live."<sup>22</sup>

Before such a task could be accomplished, however, the existing environment needed to be surveyed and documented. Out of the documentary photography of Winnipeg and other cities in the first decades of the twentieth century, a new visual representation of the city entered the public consciousness. However, such images did not simply fill a vacuum; rather, they were read within a particular moral and spiritual context. Despite the perception that the camera was positioned to simply capture an objective reality, the employment of this new visual regime ascribed a moral order to urban space that reflected a wide range of underlying anxieties and concerns about the city itself.

### **The Danger of Urban Space**

In their very ability to reproduce detail and context, photographic images made the environment that surrounded the subject an aspect that was impossible to ignore. In many of the examples already given (such as figures 1, 4, and 5), individuals and their bodies practically merge with their surroundings, or become dominated by the conditions around them. Woodsworth argued that if

22 S.P. Rose, "The Religion of a Great City: Part III," *Christian Guardian* 78/16 (17 April 1907): 8.

unchecked, the social problems of the urban environment threatened to turn the city into "a hateful thing, from which we would flee in despair – a monstrous blot on the face of God's fair earth."<sup>23</sup> Following the lead of the newspapers, church publications participated in a certain degree of sensationalism in publishing images of the "monstrous blot" of urban slums.

Photography served the purpose of documenting the threatening condition that the city had become, but the underlying danger of this environment was conceptualised not in the mere existence of poverty or slums, but rather as a relationship between urban space and the body. While the city itself was generally seen as an unhealthy place compared to the country, the deeper tension lay in how specific urban spaces could lead to both physical and moral failings. This moral ordering of urban space was explicitly and implicitly related to the bodies that occupied it. Under the new photographic strategy of social documentary, when bodies enter the frame, the bodies are usually those of children. Woodsworth's *My Neighbor* included forty-four different photographs, fifteen of which were devoid of any human subjects. Of the remaining twenty-nine pictures, twenty-one included children as part of the subject matter.

Children were prominent in the documentary activities of social reformers for a number of reasons. It was obviously easier to capture images of children than to take photographs of adults, who might have resisted the imposition. More importantly, however, the bodies of children drew attention to moral codes ascribed to the social space that surrounded them. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Methodists had started to remove the spectre of original sin from children, arguing that their innocence kept them in a state of grace. More controversial views suggested an environment of Christian nurture even removed the necessity of a traditional conversion experience.<sup>24</sup> While the exact theological relationship of children and the church remained in dispute, most agreed that without a healthy Christian home, based on Anglo-Saxon Protestant values, the moral lives of children were at risk. The pliable nature of children

23 Woodsworth, *My Neighbor*, 23.

24 Neil Semple stresses the development of the Christian nurture ideal, while Marguerite Van Die notes that Nathanael Burwash maintained the more traditional evangelical viewpoint well into the twentieth century. Although Burwash reasserted the doctrine as official church policy in 1906, the model of Christian nurture promoted by Horace Bushnell had clearly won out by 1918. See Neil Semple, "'The Nurture and Admonition of the Lord': Nineteenth-Century Canadian Methodism's Response to 'Childhood,'" *Histoire sociale/Social History* 14/27 (May 1981): 157-175; Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 363-367; Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 26-37, 191. As Phyllis Airhart notes, these issues were further complicated by psychological views of religious experience itself. Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 97-103.

in the face of their environment indicated that the space surrounding the child's body held a particular moral significance.

In making children the subject of photographic representations of urban slums, the "problem" of the city became a problem for the future of the nation. For middle-class social reformers at the turn of the century, children were central to the welfare of Canada,<sup>25</sup> and Methodists, the most self-consciously "national" Protestant denomination, repeatedly expressed these concerns. The *Guardian* editorialised that slum conditions and neglect would turn children into a "class of thugs and hooligans and criminals," and the church's greatest task lay in "safeguarding the moral and physical health and well-being of the children, and especially the children of our rapidly growing cities. The destiny of the church of the city, and of the nation rests upon the way we accomplish that task to a far greater extent than we can at all realize."<sup>26</sup>

The physical environment of the city, however, posed a number of difficulties to the creation of productive citizens out of children. Rather than offering a pure and wholesome environment, the *Guardian* characterised the atmosphere of crowded downtowns as "vitiated with smoke and tainted with a thousand inevitable odors that do not make for health." Children needed to play, but their choices were limited geographically to playing indoors or on the street: "To shut healthy children indoors to play is little short of murder ... But, in the cities, to step outdoors is to step into the street ... And unfortunately the streets are not a school of virtue, but of vice."<sup>27</sup> To place children photographically in the street was to document the moral boundaries that threatened the nation. Unsupervised children on the street were subjected to the vices of the street. Only the urban reform of cities, creating more playgrounds to provide a safe space for children, could solve the problem. As the *Guardian* put it, "Let the boys and girls have plenty of vigorous physical exercise, and the probability is they will be far less apt to become lawbreakers, and much more likely to become good citizens."<sup>28</sup>

But the moral boundaries of urban space were not gendered equally. Parks and playgrounds were necessary reforms to prevent crime and disease, but they were particularly important for boys. As articles in the *Christian Guardian* outlined, the nature of boys made urban space particularly problematic. R.B. Chadwick, Alberta's Superintendent of Dependent and Delinquent Children, explained that "The boy is a little savage, who prefers the free, natural, simple life of his aboriginal forebears to the ridiculous customs and conventionalities

25 See Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976).

26 "Giving the Children a Chance," *Christian Guardian* 82/13 (29 March 1911): 5.

27 "The City and the Children," *Christian Guardian* 78/5 (30 January 1907): 5.

28 Ibid.

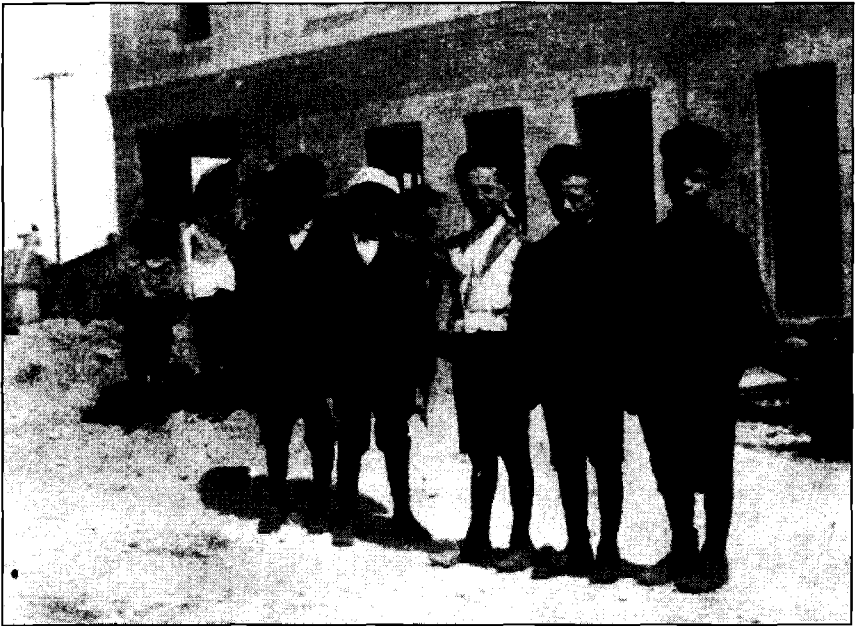


Figure 6. This image of boys on the street was used in a variety of Methodist publications. Photographer unknown. Reprinted from J. S. Woodsworth, *My Neighbor* (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1911), facing p. 109.

of civilization ... His savage instinct demands that he live close to nature." As Canadian cities became crowded, an "insufficiency of grounds" prevents the boy from "finding an outlet for his desire to run and play." The result was predictable: without a safe space in which to express his natural inclination, the boy would "become outlawed or a criminal."<sup>29</sup> The streets of the city were defined as a moral space that produced criminal bodies, an area that threatened the health of boys in particular, and by extension, the manhood and leadership of the nation.

While it was common to find photographic images of both girls and boys in the street, often with captions that commented on the lack of playground space, pictures of girls alone on the street were practically non-existent. The same was not true of boys, however. *My Neighbor* included a photograph (Figure 6) of a line of boys with the caption "Boys of school age on the street." The same image was published in a special "city" issue of the *Missionary Outlook*, the magazine of the Young Peoples' Forward Movement. F.C.

29 R.B. Chadwick, "The Boys: A Social Problem," *Christian Guardian* 81/52 (28 December 1910): 9-10.



Stephenson, secretary of the YPFM, and Woodsworth's publisher, excerpted part of *My Neighbor* for the issue and had some of the photographs reprinted. Underneath the image of the boys, the caption starkly asked "NEGLECTED NOW – WHAT OF THEIR FUTURE?" and included a subtitle that implied the voices of the boys themselves, stating, "We run the streets all day."<sup>30</sup>

Girls needed parks as well, but the moral space of greatest concern for them lay not in exterior spaces, but within interior spaces. Streets were dangerous, but the greater danger of moral corruption for girls lay in the largely unspoken fear of sex and girls becoming "fallen" in their morals. At a time when the domestic space of middle-class households emphasised separate bedrooms and offered girls' bodies a private space, the emergence of tenement houses and slums with overcrowded conditions raised fears that the environment was corrupting girls. Families sharing a single room, and sometimes, a single bed, was a sight fearful enough. The greater worry was when families took in boarders, often single men; girls mixed with this uncontrolled element would find their moral state under threat.

Unlike the relatively straightforward campaign for playgrounds, however, raising the issue of sexuality was complicated by social sensibilities. The Reverend James Allen, Secretary of the Home Mission Department of the Methodist Missionary Society, caused an uproar in Winnipeg when he gave a sensational address to an Ottawa audience, claiming that living conditions were so poor in Winnipeg's North End that "whole sections of the female population were being driven into virtual prostitution." An outraged Winnipeg newspaper broadcast the headline "Winnipeg Given Bad Reputation," and the city council was up in arms at the remarks.<sup>31</sup>

Respectable Winnipeg did not want its reputation sullied by such generalisations about prostitution, but the underlying visualisation of moral boundaries within the interior of the homes remained. The *Winnipeg Tribune* sensationalised a case in which a fine had been levied against a boarding house owner with the headline, "Girls and Men in Same Room." The item went on to report that "The house consists of three rooms and a cellar and is large enough to hold seven people, but the accused was found to have 25 people living in his domicile, three of whom occupied the cellar and in one room girls and men slept."<sup>32</sup> In Toronto, a missionary worker related similar stories on the "secret sufferings and horrors of Toronto's 'Ward,'" where girls grew up "without privacy, without self-respect."<sup>33</sup>

30 *Missionary Outlook* 31/11 (November 1911): 251.

31 UCA, 78.099C, Methodist Church of Canada Board of Home Missions, Box 7, File 3, unidentified newspaper clippings, 11 October 1909.

32 UCA, 78.099C, Methodist Church of Canada Board of Home Missions, Box 7, File 3, *Winnipeg Tribune* newspaper clipping c. 1909.

33 "Sad Picture of Toronto's Slums," *Toronto Star*, 19 October 1909, p. 1.



Figure 7. Interior of a North End home, Winnipeg. Photographer: L.B. Foote, c. 1911. Winnipeg: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, No. N2438. The image was also published in the *Winnipeg Tribune*, 28 September 1911.

Photographs taken by L.B. Foote of domestic interiors from the North End were framed within this context of moral concern. One image (Figure 7) juxtaposes the bodies of men, all of working age, with the bodies of children (boys and girls) within the cramped quarters of the home. Although one of the men is holding two children in his arms, perhaps signifying a paternal relationship, the other men remain detached from any clear familial ties. *My Neighbor* reproduced similar images that problematized the issue of gender and beds. One example (Figure 8) shows the fur-coated mission worker in a large room, crowded with beds. The image frames a distinct gender division between the women and girls on one side and the men on the other.

Mariana Valverde argues that for most reformers the “sexual secret of the slum” was incest, an “unmentionable vice lurking deep beneath the crust of civilization.”<sup>34</sup> Despite Woodsworth’s oblique reference to it through the use of a quotation from Tennyson (included as an epigraph in *My Neighbor*), the

34 Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991), 139. Valverde also notes the problem of male boarders, but prioritises the issue of incest.



Figure 8. Mission worker in a room with many beds, Winnipeg. Photographer unknown. Reprinted from J. S. Woodsworth, *My Neighbor* (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1911), facing p. 220.

general characterisation of crowded living conditions in Methodist publications does not substantiate Valverde's claim. Rather, in reports from the North End of Winnipeg of how the "other half" lived, the greatest expression of anxiety concerned the problem of unattached male boarders. When the Reverend S.P. Rose took readers on an imaginary "pilgrimage" to some North End homes, he described one domestic household as being occupied by a "Ruthenian woman" and two children in a room that is "neat and fairly clean," but in which danger lay, not in the close quarters of the family, but in the presence of five male boarders which made "decency and morality are inconceivable." In contrast, another one-room household of two parents and four children, including an eighteen-year-old daughter, was described as a "more hopeful" situation largely because there were no boarders.<sup>35</sup>

The moral implications of bodies crowded together extended into images that ostensibly documented environment alone. Foote's photograph of an unkept bed (Figure 9) was originally published in the *Winnipeg Telegram*,

35 S.P. Rose, "The Raw Material of Canadian Citizenship: A Closer View," *Christian Guardian* 79/34 (19 August 1908): 9-10.

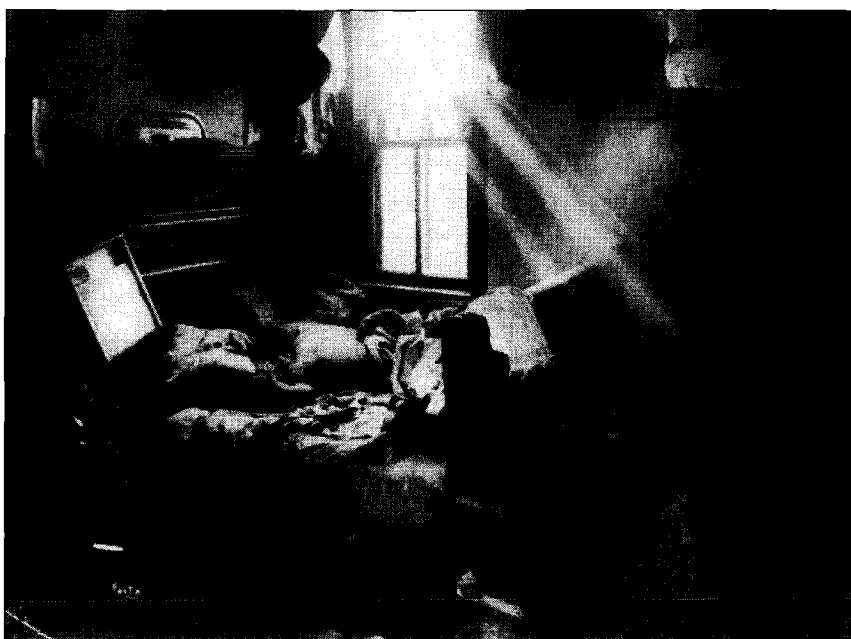


Figure 9. Photograph of a one-room home for six people in Winnipeg. Photographer: L.B. Foote, 1908. Toronto: United Church of Canada / Victoria University Archives, No. 93.049P/3117N.

complete with the prominent headline “Six were Sleeping in This Room.”<sup>36</sup> Without physically placing the bodies onto the frame, the moral implications were read through the context which problematized such conditions on multiple levels. Although the accompanying article on visitations to the poor in preparation for distributing Christmas funds did not refer explicitly to the photograph, it did complain about Winnipeg’s familiar problem of overcrowding. Single-room homes that contained both large families and male boarders produced circumstances where the “sanitary conditions were something to appal one and the moral atmosphere under each surroundings can be imagined.”<sup>37</sup> The same image was reprinted as an illustration for an article on All Peoples’ Mission in the *Canadian Epworth Era*.<sup>38</sup> The absence of bodies did not lessen the moral boundaries ascribed to urban space, given the ability of readers to “imagine” it.

36 Woodsworth Scrapbooks, *Winnipeg Telegram*, 16 December 1908.

37 Woodsworth Scrapbooks, “Some of Children to be Gladdened by Fund,” *Winnipeg Telegram*, 16 December 1908.

38 Woodsworth Scrapbooks, *Canadian Epworth Era* (March 1909): 68.

## Conclusion

The meaning of the social gospel is traditionally framed in connection with issues such as secularisation, the rise of the welfare state, or class-based theories of social control. However, a deeper epistemological engagement with modernity within the social gospel has been overlooked, especially in the Canadian context. The new focus upon social conditions at the turn of the century required a new way of “seeing” and “surveying” the city. The progressive vision of churches and church workers within the photographic representations of Methodist publications had to make room for an objective exposure of how the “other half” lived. The arrival of the social documentary style produced a dramatic shift in the visualisation of Winnipeg within Methodist publications at the turn of the century.

One of the major differences between the two different photographic strategies, however, lay in how the images related to the text. When photographs were used to exemplify the progressive expansion of the church, they were carefully linked to the accompanying narrative; through captions or references within articles, people and places were carefully identified. In contrast, there was a remarkable discontinuity in the narrative when images that offered a social documentary were published. People are rarely identified by name, and often even the name of the city is absent, let alone more specific indications of place. This absence of narrative reinforced the underlying notion that the subjects were not important as individual people, but rather served as bodies framed by the environment. Such a “depersonalised” approach was, as John Tagg has noted, indicative of the practices of “professional social technicians” who believed that social problems could be solved through environmental change.<sup>39</sup> Set within the context of Methodist publications, the namelessness of subjects overshadowed by the details of their surroundings had a particular theological resonance that implicitly downplayed the importance of individual conversion and reinforced a collective moral understanding of the urban environment.

Referring to the photographs within a 1911 study of Toronto slums, Mariana Valverde observed that there were “many more dirty outhouses than criminal human beings,” and suggests that “this shift in focus from the poor people to their habitat reflects not a shedding of moralism in favour of science but simply the ascription of moral deviance to physical objects.”<sup>40</sup> However, objects in themselves did not reflect a moral order as much as they created a moral space which produced moral bodies. The bodies of children in particular offered social reformers malleable material, but the meanings of these bodies could be understood only as products of their environment. Woodsworth

<sup>39</sup> Tagg, 131-132.

<sup>40</sup> Valverde, 133.

summed up this relationship when he claimed that “Crime, immorality, disease and misery vary almost directly as the size of the plot, the breadth of the street and the number of parks.”<sup>41</sup> As sin was increasingly seen as the product of an environment, the environment itself required surveillance.

Documenting the shift in visual imagery in Methodist publications is a much simpler task than analysing its meaning. Peter Burke suggests that visual images are both “an essential and treacherous source” for historians, in part because “Images can bear witness to what is not put into words.”<sup>42</sup> While we can only speculate as to the exact intentions of Woodsworth and others who promoted this strategic shift to the social documentary style, the wordlessness of photographs should not obscure or diminish how such images operated within the historical context of their production (and reproduction). This visual ordering was not simply symbolic of social reform ideals, but actively constructed a view of the city through its own technological authority, an objective claim to dispassionate representation of the urban space surrounding the body. In return, the very context in which this re-imaging took place invested the urban landscape with multiple layers of moral boundaries, where the dangers to physical and spiritual health were clearly exposed. Although they were disconnected from the overt narratives of missionary work, social documentary photographs spoke to a broader narrative that positioned the religious response to the city as both a moral and environmental issue.

41 Woodsworth, *My Neighbor*, 47; also quoted in Valverde, 130.

42 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 31.