

A Major Setback for Secularism in Quebec Schools

Marie-Michelle Poisson, Translation: David Rand

More Religion than Previously

As of September 2008, religion now has objectively an even greater presence in the primary and secondary schools of Quebec than it had back in 2000 when the adoption of Bill 118 ended denominational schools in Quebec's public system.

There is more religion first of all because of the class time allotted to the new Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program. This program exposes students to a greater variety of religious denominations, with a compulsory emphasis on Christianity. Under the old regime, religion was optional, so that only pupils whose parents had chosen religious teaching were exposed to a Catholic or Protestant curriculum. But now, even those children who were exempted from religious teaching must take the "religious culture" course.

And there is additional religion also because of the creation of a new service SAVSEC (*Service d'animation à la vie spirituelle et à l'engagement communautaire*) which promotes "spiritual life" and "community involvement." SAVSEC is compulsory in all schools, both primary and secondary. Before 2000, pastoral service was offered only in a few secondary schools in the Catholic system and was in the process of disappearing in some areas due to lack of participation. Further, no pastoral service entirely funded by the state existed at the primary level.

The result of the recent changes is that we now have a school system which, instead of being truly secular, is rather multi-denominational or multi-religious, with a continued major presence for Christianity.

A Pro-religious Lobby in the Ministry of Education

Those who support a true secularisation of the Quebec school system would be well advised to take a close look at the activities of the Secretariat for Religious Affairs (SRA) and the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). Indeed, recent developments give every reason to believe that the SRA and CRA operate as pro-religious lobbies within the Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sports (MERS).

In the year 2000, the positions of deputy minister associated with each of the Catholic and Protestant committees were abolished and replaced by the SRA and CRA which, since that time, have overseen the process of deconfessionalisation of the school system and are considered, in the words of the current coordinator of the SRA, Mr. Roger Boisvert, to be the master builders of the new Ethics and Religious Culture program and of the SAVSEC.

This amounts to asking the wolf to guard the sheep, because the SRA and CRA are themselves leftovers from the old clerical regime and constitute a veritable and highly effective pro-religious lobby working within the ministry of education itself.

The SRA, Think Tank of Pro-religious Ideology

Madame Christine Cadrin-Pelletier, a theologian by training, was the Catholic deputy minister from 1995 to 2000 and thus in charge of the Catholic Committee, before taking on the position of secretary for religious affairs from 2000 to 2005.

Since leaving that position, Mme Cadrin-Pelletier has written the two most important documents published by the CRA: *Secular Schools in Quebec. A Necessary Change of Institutional Culture* (October 2006) and *The Spiritual Development of Pupils. A Challenge for Secular Schools* (February 2007). The first document purports to define, in five points, the “model of open secularism of Quebec public schools” which the majority of Quebecers supposedly favour. The second document makes a valiant attempt to explain how and why “facilitating the spiritual development of pupils” should be a fundamental objective of schools.

French philosopher Henri Pena-Ruiz, who has written extensively on secularism (*laïcité*), describes “open secularism” (*laïcité ouverte*) as a polemical concept advanced in opposition to secularism which, if applied rigorously, would, according to its detractors, be repressive and closed. These anti-secularists use the expression “open secularism” to imply the opening up of secularism, that is opening it by restoring to religions the powers they once held over public institutions.

The problem is that this so-called secularism is so “open” to religion that it gives paradoxically even more precedence to religious phenomena. The principal beneficiaries of open secularism are faculties of theology and religious studies!

Defending the Interests of Theologians

The Committee on Religious Affairs is composed of 13 members, nominated by the minister of education, of which at least one third are chosen from university faculties of theology and religious studies. The current president, Mr.

Jacques Racine, has been Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences of Laval University and member of the Prospective Committee of the Assembly of Quebec Bishops.

The CRA has published several notices as part of the ministry of education. These documents are all available on the web site of the MERS. The first notice, published in 2003 and entitled *Teacher Training in Personal Development: A Symptomatic Crisis* made an alarming observation: in anticipation of upcoming ministerial decisions, apprehensions about the future of religious and moral education pro-

grams were so great that departments of theology and religious studies which trained future public school teachers in those disciplines either had to close up shop or were in danger of being forced to close. Future prospects, already gloomy in 2002, would become even worse if religious teaching were reduced or eliminated entirely.

By proposing to the Minister the creation of a new discipline called “religious culture” and a new spiritual animation service, both of which would

be compulsory for all students throughout the primary and secondary school years, the CRA, which also had the mandate to oversee development of training programs for future teachers of ERC and future SAVSEC animators, thus ensured the survival of university faculties of theology and religious studies which up until then had been threatened with obsolescence and closure. The specialized training of teachers of religious culture and animators of the “spiritual life” service would be done first and foremost by university faculties of theology and religious studies.

***And if there were a
God, I think it very
unlikely that He
would have such
an uneasy vanity
as to be offended
by those who doubt
His existence.***

Bertrand Russell

Falsehoods and Inconsistencies of the Ethics and Religious Culture Program

The MLQ has raised some serious questions about the bizarre foundations of a program which makes the completely arbitrary assumption that the teaching of ethics must go hand in hand with religious culture. Are we to believe that religion is the only aspect of culture which allows us to understand contemporary Quebec society? Does religious culture alone give meaning to our existence and foster harmonious relations with others? Has religious culture suddenly become more important than scientific culture, than philosophy, than the arts, than musical culture, than even education or the economy? Certainly not. So why then has religious culture been given such primacy of place, to the detriment of other forms of culture which are just as essential for child development?

Usurping the Purposes of Ethics

The stated goals of the new ERC program are respect for others and pursuit of the common good. While there is no difficulty in agreeing that these are the specific purposes of ethics, we must however realize that they do not necessarily apply when religion is involved. Have religions not often shown a great deal of reluctance to recognize the equal humanity of the other when that "other" happens to be pagan, female, a non-believer, homosexual or atheist?

Is not the strict prohibition of condom use, as decreed by the Catholic Church, a real obstacle to the achievement of the common good? Should we not, in order to promote the common good, be compelled rather to take effective measures against the AIDS pandemic, or for birth control in overpopulated countries?

In the ERC program, the purposes of ethics have been scandalously usurped and falsely attributed to various religions, thus touting the baseless idea that religions are always necessary guarantors of respect for others and the common good.

This usurping of ethics by the authors of the new program can probably be explained as

Does religious culture alone give meaning to our existence and foster harmonious relations with others?

an error based on a common prejudice which is still widely held in many sectors of the population. Too many people still maintain the belief that religion is an infallible guardian of morality. Worse, too many remain sincerely convinced that all moral rules originated with Christianity, even though human civilizations have existed for ten thousand years! Did civi-

lizations which predated Jesus not have any notion of good and evil? Were not Amerindian cultures able to distinguish good from evil long before the arrival of Christopher Columbus? How could the authors of the ERC program not be aware that, in the West, Greek philosophers of antiquity had already formulated the foundations of philosophical ethics as early as 400 years before J.C.?

Dubious Omissions?

It is distressing to realize that substantial ethical knowledge has been deliberately omitted from ERC and that ethical problems are never approached except in the form of superficial questions. The omission of ethical philosophy is shocking for two reasons. Firstly, a major portion of the material which should have been included in such a program is simply ignored without explanation or justification. But even more serious is the fact that, on the other hand, religious practices are given an exagger-

ated emphasis in the program, similarly without justification.

A Difficult Role for the Teacher

Quebec legislation on public education was modified in 2005 to abolish teachers' right to refuse to teach the new religion course for reasons of freedom of conscience. Moreover, the teacher is required to adopt a "professional posture" of neutrality and restraint, as stipulated in the preamble of the program. This constraint becomes untenable because it requires that only those religious activities compatible with recognition of the other and pursuit of the common good may be presented, and it imposes silence about all aspects less compatible with those ends. Thus, aspects of religion which promote the superiority of men over women, or of one "elected people" over all others, would necessarily be omitted. Also ignored would be religious manifestations which have long been openly hostile to the quest for the common good, such as the undeniable fact that certain religions are contemptuous of earthly pleasures and happiness, and place obstacles in the path of scientific progress and the material betterment of the poor. Religious education which ignores the negative aspects is biased education; it is a form of propaganda and false representation.

Insulting Intelligence and Offending Philosophy

This ERC program was conceived in isolation and in utter secrecy by persons for whom the pursuit of the common good is less important than the advancement of their own vested interests and the promotion of their personal convictions. Given the errors, inconsistencies and serious omissions which plague the program, if its authors are not incompetent then

they are sinister manipulators who have gone to extreme lengths in order to find new ways to preserve the essence of religious schooling, even while the school system evolved in an ostensibly secular direction. Indeed, Mme Cadrin-Pelletier has publicly stated that preserving religion in schools was their objective¹.

The most disturbing aspect of these developments is that the Minister of Education as well as her advisors in the Committee on Religious Affairs appear to be completely oblivious to the fate of young children and adolescents who find themselves in the middle of an ugly quarrel among adults, because of an inadequate program which is unable to provide a viable and definitive solution to the thorny problem of religious teaching in public schools. In the final analysis, the most vulnerable and suggestible members of our society are paying the cost of this deplorable mess which has led us currently to more than 2000 requests for exemption and which will inevitably result in further conflicts and tensions unless the Minister deigns to take the measures necessary to avoid them.

The MLQ maintains a fervent desire for the establishment of a truly secular public school system in Quebec. That is why it favours not only the abolition of the religious culture part of the ERC program, but also the complete and definitive abolition of both the Secretariat for Religious Affairs and the Committee on Religious Affairs.

Reference

1. Christine Cadrin-Pelletier, 10th March 2008, at an event marking the 25th anniversary of the *Centre Justice et Foi*.

Marie-Michelle Poisson is President of the Mouvement laïque québécois (MLQ) or Quebec Secular Movement.

Religious education which ignores the negative aspects is biased education.