



Gouvernement du Québec
Conseil supérieur de l'éducation
Comité protestant

THE PROTESTANT FACT in QUÉBEC EDUCATION

**Position stated by the Protestant Committee,
142nd meeting, January 28, 1977.**

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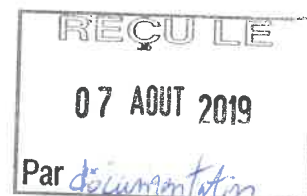
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A feeling of meaninglessness afflicts mankind. With the pace of the loss of traditional meaning accelerated in an age of transformation such as ours, uncertainty, disillusionment and a sense of futility suffuse our society and overwhelm many. Since education, whether in school or elsewhere, is a search for meaning, it follows that education is under stress, for often conventional answers no longer satisfy. It is our contention that this search for meaning is best provided for in a confessional system of education, which takes cognizance of the current uncertainties over values, and yet provides the possibility of sustained study of ultimate questions and all possible answers within the context of an ethos that is sustaining. The alternatives would compound the problem of meaninglessness, either by leaving the basic questions unexamined or by exposing young people to the uncertainties and disappointments of following alone and without any assistance in integration every will-o'-the-wisp of transient belief.

Protestants have lived and worked in Québec since the foundation of New France. Sieur de Monts, a Calvinist, just as his sovereign Henry IV had been, was appointed lieutenant-general “of the coasts, lands and confines of Acadia, Canada and other places in New France” in 1603.¹ Elsewhere on the shores of present-day Québec, Hudson and James Bay commemorate the work and voyages of other Protestant explorers. In subsequent centuries, it is possible to list many who, building on the foundations their predecessors had laid, raised a distinctive mode of education for the Protestant dimension of the Québec community. William Smith and Jacob Mountain in the eighteenth century, James McGill and William Dawson in the nineteenth, Sinclair Laird and W.P. Percival in the twentieth, all came from varied backgrounds both Canadian and overseas, owed allegiance to different church traditions but subscribed to and helped to build a type of education demonstrably and definably Protestant.

Although it is the spirit and not the letter that must be paramount in Protestant education, an understanding of the legal position in Québec education is valuable in helping towards a definition of a Protestant school. The Education Act of 1846 set up common schools across the Province (then Canada East) but with the wise proviso that at the local level the minority might dissent. Section 26 which gave this right reads: “That when in any Municipality, the regulations and arrangements made by the School Commissioners for the conduct of any School, shall not be agreeable to any number whatever of the inhabitants professing a religious faith different from that of the majority of the inhabitants of such Municipality, the inhabitants so dissentient may collectively signify such dissent in writing to the Chairman of said Commissioners, and give the names of three Trustees, chosen by them for the purpose of this Act...” This possibility for dissent held good whether the minority was Catholic or Protestant, so that the Catholic dissentient boards which still exist at Greenfield Park, Leeds Sud and Portage du Fort, and the Protestant dissentient boards of Baie Comeau, Rouyn and Ste. Agathe are present-day embodiments of Québec law allowing dissent at the local level. Naturally it was usually the Protestants who dissented for they were and are the minority overall, amounting to about one-tenth of the total population at the last census. This proclivity for dissent is in keeping with the origin of the term Protestant, given originally to those who protested at Speyer in 1529, and appropriated by the movement that revolted against the enforced mediaeval synthesis of religion and culture.

In the context of nineteenth-century Québec, the word “Protestant” would have a clear, widely-accepted and easily-understood meaning, namely a person claiming membership in one of those churches shaped at the Reformation or formed subsequently from the same inspiration. While this would still hold for many in our Protestant schools to-day, it is no longer an all-embracing definition. Change has

¹ *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 1. Entry under Du Gua de Monts, Pierre

come in three ways viz. in the migration into Québec of groups not here in 1846; in the change of religious affiliation of some segments of Québec's population; and the diversification of Protestant theology.

The way in which many Jewish children have come to be educated in Protestant schools and classed as Protestant will illustrate how the Protestant community has responded to changed conditions produced by immigration. Most Jews coming to the Province in the late nineteenth century settled in Montréal, and sent their children to Protestant schools. The Protestant Board of School Commissioners of Montréal, while thus generally allowing Jewish children to be educated in their schools, refused to admit an obligation to do so until an Act was passed in 1903 classing Jews as Protestants. Even more telling of the way in which traditional Protestants accommodated other groups is the fact that after the 1903 law had been declared unconstitutional in 1928, and it had been held in the Privy Council that the Provincial legislature had the right to bring into being Jewish schools, the Jewish community preferred making an agreement with Protestants to setting up their own schools.⁽²⁾

Similarly changes in religious affiliation by some Quebecers have had an effect upon Protestant schooling and upon the meaning of the term Protestant. This is best illustrated by the position of the Jehovah's Witnesses. In the well-known case in Rouyn, a Roman Catholic parent, after conversion to the beliefs of the Witnesses of Jehovah, attempted to enter his children in the Protestant dissentient schools, was refused, took his case to court and won his point on appeal. The appeal judges held that he was a Protestant on the ground that "to be considered a Protestant it is sufficient to be a Christian and to repudiate the authority of the Pope".⁽³⁾ While many theologians and church historians might tend to demur on this dictum in this context, it is easy to see how an administrator would work on the rule of thumb, "Protestant = Non-Catholic".

The third source of change is the diversification of Protestant theology. If we consider Paul Tillich's interpretation of religion in terms of meaning, that is the "radical human question of what it means to be a man"; or Reinhold Niebuhur's devotion to the ideal of applying his faith to the problems of politics and society; or Helmut Thielicke's attempt to make the theological insights of the Reformation ethically relevant for our own age, we will glimpse the divergent avenues of thought characteristic of twentieth-century Protestant theology.

So 'Protestant', while retaining its traditional meaning for some, is being used in relation to the school system of Québec in a way that must baffle the understanding of many outsiders. Worse, because it is misunderstood, or at least the variety of its meaning not fully grasped, there is a tendency to say that 'Protestant' has been pre-empted of meaning and that another form of organization ought to be instituted. This is often resented by traditional Protestants, for the lack of clarity has been brought about more by their own generosity in welcoming other groups and ideas than by the more public decisions to be found in the statutes and in the jurisprudence. Yet Protestantism constitutes an important foundation element in our North American culture, and all who come into the Protestant system in Québec must benefit from an exposure to Protestant values in an educative context. Thus, it is essential to see clearly that the Protestant system is attempting to accommodate all "Protestants", whether broadly or traditionally defined.

Disentangling the apparently confused theories underlying Protestant educational practice in Québec, one finds three main threads:

² Stuart E. Rosenberg *The Jewish Community in Canada*, vol. 1, p. 214.

³ C.B. Sissons *Church and State in Canadian Education*, p. 514.

1. Protestant Education is Christian Education in the Reformation tradition. Here, the study of the Bible and of religion is essential at all stages of education on both cultural and spiritual grounds, and all subjects should be taught from a Christian, though not sectarian point of view.
2. Protestant Education is the process whereby the Protestant community, recognizing the multi-confessional nature of society, exercises its legal responsibility to provide confessional public education based on the Judaeo-Christian culture, in a spirit of free enquiry and respect of differing opinions.
3. Protestant Education is a process whereby the non-Roman Catholic community provides for itself public education based on an openness to world culture. Here courses in religion may be offered in school but only to demonstrate the bases of world culture.

In this diversity, where is there unity? Proponents of all positions would probably be united in agreement on the two crucial aspects of the Protestant principle: protest and openness. The protest is characteristically against all forms of absolutizing, e.g. against ideologies of right and left. The openness is an openness to all forms of enquiry: which means that all who are involved in Protestant schools may have something to contribute to the content of the education provided.

Let us briefly examine the alternative structures. Two proposals are widely mooted. One is a unified system of common schools. The other is a division by language. Surely Québec's unique situation precludes the adoption of a single system of school boards, serving both Protestants and Catholics, English and French. It seems to us that the centrifugal forces in Québec society are producing a desire for greater diversity rather than a more rigid unity, so that, for example, English-speaking Catholics and French-speaking Protestants are demanding their own administrations to a greater extent not less. In any case, suppose we were to have a single school system in Quebec, what would happen to the two cultures as they passed through the melting pot? They might be fused into a dubious amalgam, but most likely we would get the brittlest of alloys.

Many will see language as the factor that ought to define groups within the school system. To us confessionality transcends language. Let us illustrate our position on the relationship between language and culture by reference to Québec's most northerly people, the Inuit. Let us suppose that the Inuit wish to preserve their culture, and that defining their culture in linguistic terms they insist that television programmes for the far north be in Inuit. Dubbing Inuit into the "King of Kensington" or "Symphonien" would satisfy this regulation, but do nothing to preserve Inuit culture, for culture involves the whole *modus operandi* of the society, and in healthy society the *modus operandi* is based on a set of principles, and those principles are founded on what concern men ultimately, which is the way we have defined religion.⁴

In short we hold to the position that the moral elevation of society does not come by abandoning one's principles to the lowest common denominator of the common school: nor is cultural survival made more likely by definitions framed in terms of the superficialities of language. Rather, moral elevation and cultural survival will come by holding fast to principles and by embodying those principles in the school system.

Lest it be thought that this position is inimical to change, let us point out how much has been accomplished by Québec's Protestants in the last ten years. Quick to grasp the

⁴ We realise the complexity of the question, but it is our contention that a study of the sociology of religion and of civilization would indicate that *religion*, in the sense of the *ultimate values* which shape the mentalities of human beings, is, while not independent of the factors of culture and language, determinative of the shape of a given society. See Jacques Ellul *La Trahison de l'Occident*, pp. 30-40.

spirit of the Parent Report, they transformed their high schools, especially outside Montréal, adding technical and vocational education to the traditional offerings and housing those schools in new buildings on fewer sites. Similarly the Protestant Committee has revised its *Regulation*, under which Protestant schools are required by law to operate, in the light of the changes in clientèle, in thought and insight shed over Québec in this era of change. It has also approved courses of study in Moral and Religious Instruction, formulated by Protestant teachers under the aegis of the Protestant Education Service to meet to-day's needs. The aims of the elementary curriculum are set forth thus:

- “(1) to deepen the child's natural tendency to wonder at the mystery of life in order to develop a respect for himself, for others and for the world in which he lives;
- (2) to provide the child with some of the knowledge necessary to permit his adaptation to his moral and religious environment, while not insisting on conformity to it.”

Copies of these courses are being disseminated to Protestant schools throughout the province: workshops are being held to acquaint Protestant teachers and administrators with the principles underlying these courses, and the substance of them: while the far-travelled members of the Protestant Education Service are helping to overcome any difficulties that may be encountered. In short change is just as much possible in our confessional system as it is in a country where “In God we trust” may be proclaimed on the bank-notes but not in the public schools.

All this has been accomplished; more is in train. Protestant education must respond to the need for increased understanding of the Province as a whole. Looking at the simple example of Québec's commemorative toponymy, what does the average Protestant see? In Mercier only a bridge, in Taschereau only a boulevard, and Henri Bourassa a stop at the end of the Metro. The Protestant Committee would seek to encourage not merely the learning of French — for that is so widely accepted that to do so would be superfluous — but also the teaching of Québec history, art and letters to an even greater extent in Protestant schools.

We must understand too the changing demographic structure of the Protestant community. While the popular stereotype of the Protestant community as an enclave of entrepreneurs was never really true, with the change in Québec society certainly the Protestant communities in mill-and mining-towns have declined in the last two decades. This decline has been off-set by a rise in the number of Protestants whose language is French. The figures from the last census must finally convince all that “Protestant” and “English-speaking” cannot be equated; for then there were 400,000 Protestants in Québec who spoke English at home, and some 84,000 Quebecers, who like Calvin, were Protestants and spoke French at home. It will be necessary for Protestant School Boards to respond to this change in the distribution of the dissentient minority.

At the same time we are not discarding our Protestant traditions. It is sometimes said that this decade is a conservative age. It is nothing of the kind. With the frenzied shrillness of the sixties replaced by a certain sullenness, much that is good is being let go by default, so that the fabric of our society may be eaten away as moths fret a garment. Within our confessional system there is still the possibility for the traditional Protestant position, where the parents want it. For example, some will say that the best way of dealing with a contemporary problem, e.g. how to produce a more even distribution of the world's goods both within and between countries, is by teaching the Tenth Commandment, “Thou shalt not covet...”, properly, by precept and example. And if the parents want it, who shall gainsay them? Indeed, a neutral bystander may say that such a mode of action is preferable to the contemporary addiction to mountainous volumes of regulations which the astute but immoral are able to circumvent but in whose labyrinthine ways the good are lost. In other words Christian spirit is better than pharisaical legalism.

Many will agree that such a position is possible, but will then want to know how such a stance differs from the Roman Catholic way of thought. Let us say that we realise that immense changes have taken place in the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II, and that it is not the “monolithic” organization of popular belief. Yet there is a difference between a typical Roman Catholic position and a typical Protestant position. For example, and perhaps centrally, there is a difference in the Doctrine of Salvation. For the typical Protestant layman it is perceived as entirely a matter of individual choice, whereas for the typical Catholic layman — if we dare to speak on belief other than our own for the sake of answering a question so frequently and so pertinently asked — the sense of individual decision is not nearly so clear. For the historically minded, who see in Protestantism Augustinianism revived, St. Augustine suffers the mental agony of individual choice, but St. Thomas Aquinas, in his task of uniting Christian doctrine with Aristotelian philosophy, passes through no such crisis to produce a theology certainly valid but also certainly different. Such differences between the stress on the individual and the stress on the group thread their way through Québec history and Québec society. We realise that a Catholic must often be exasperated when looking at the ways Protestants operate. All must seem chaotic, or at least in disarray. Ruefully, we admit that our stress on individualism will make us unable ever to produce a solid phalanx, even at Armageddon.

Once it is understood that Protestantism, for all its diversity, takes its stand upon individualism in this sense, three things become clear: —

1. Protestantism cannot be true to itself if it attempts to impose doctrine upon pupils in the public schools. Only too frequently the word religion gives the hearer a sense of unease, even alarm. All we can do is to re-iterate that we have no intention of imposing doctrine upon pupils in our schools. Our Protestant teachers, administrators and school boards have no intention of doing so, and in any case our *Regulation* prohibits it.

Our position is therefore not at all parallel to the Catholic position which has been expressed thus: — “Le professeur d’enseignement religieux a pour tâche première de guider les jeunes dans la recherche et la découverte de l’objet de la foi, de les conduire au seuil d’un choix personnel.”⁵

Thus, although we are an overwhelmingly Christian province, in which in 1971 of the 6,028,000 Quebecers, 5,251,000 were Catholics and 485,000 of “Traditional” Protestant denominations, yet our Protestant schools were able to provide satisfactory schooling not only for those who fall within the conventional definition of Protestant, but also for those Quebecers who, like the Jews, are of another religion but who find in the Protestant school that context to the search for meaning that is education.

2. Protestantism sees the family as antecedent to all institutions of human creation, so that ultimate earthly authority in the case of the education of the children resides not in the school, nor in the state, nor in any collectivity, nor even with the church to which individuals belong, but with the individual parents of the children being educated. So Protestantism is resistant to totalitarian societies of Marxist or other brands that demand not merely conformity but insist on a compulsory enthusiasm for themselves.
3. Just as Luther at Worms appealed as an individual to Scripture and reason, untrammelled by any institution, so Protestants have developed a consciousness of individual liberty. Partly by the nature of their education, they have stood fast by it, so that they are vigilant against the erosion of individual liberty that can be the beginning of tyranny. Happy the society that has such a purgative in its body politic.

⁵ *Voies et Impasses*, vol. 2, p. 24, section 38.

Among Québec's many virtues, most of which are unsung and misunderstood, the principle of dissent, which in an earthy but popular figure lies at the grassroots of her school system, is one of the expressions of her genius. While it is perhaps too early to form a fully valid interpretation of the complex series of crises in Canada and the United States in the nineteen-sixties: one thing is reasonably certain — existing structures often did not allow dissent to be expressed constructively.

Yet in the Province of Québec we have embodied in law and in our institutions this tradition of allowing dissent, which if only we would understand it fully and use it properly, comes to the very heart of this most important of contemporary problems. So, mindful of our long tradition — for it is now four hundred years since Robert Wolfall celebrated the first Protestant Communion Service in Canada in 1578 — and standing not so much on the promises of the clauses of the British North America Act, though the security they give is reassuring, but rather in the conviction that the basis of education in Québec is better than anywhere else in Canada or the United States, it is the hope of the Protestant Committee, in God's good time and through His Grace, to help lead the education of this Province to that position of pre-eminence that is rightfully hers.

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