



BRIEF FOR THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION
RETHINKING THE CONFESSIONAL DEBATE

A COMMON
PUBLIC CULTURE
FOR QUÉBEC
SCHOOLS

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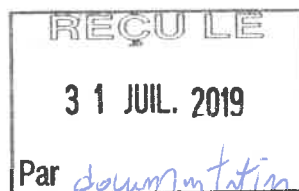
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FOR QUÉBEC
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The Protestant Committee mandated a sub-committee composed of Bruno Désorcy, Chairman; Graham Peter Jackson, President of the Protestant Committee; and Johanne Dupras, John Picard, and G. Emmanuel Pierre, members, to prepare this brief.

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INTRODUCTION

The trend to deconfessionalize Québec school boards is gaining support, from both the public at large and religious institutions. However, this latest step towards secularization of public institutions hardly spells the end of the debate surrounding confessional services in schools since religion goes far beyond the education system to suffuse the length and breadth of human experience. For example, how does one reconcile the right and responsibility of parents concerning religious education with the fact that most of them want to be able to choose between moral and religious education and moral education as separate disciplines? To complicate matters further, the common notion that “religion is a private affair” vies with the idea that “religion is a public affair”, a position espoused by many groups who refuse to allow confessional services to disappear, but who, at the same time, endorse the principle of secularization of the public domain. We therefore deem it urgent that another facet of the secularization issue - the definition of a common public culture for Québec schools at the dawn of the year 2000 - be addressed. This brief is a summary of the Protestant Committee’s deliberations on the essential features of the new “secular pact” that is the wave of the future for the education system.

A COMMON PUBLIC CULTURE FOR QUÉBEC SCHOOLS

The expression “common public culture for Québec schools”, while taken from the document entitled *The State of Education in Québec* presented by the Commission for the Estates General on Education in February 1996, was not examined in depth in the Commission’s summary. We consider it unthinkable that the definition of “secularization” not be shaped by the experience we would like our children to have, from kindergarten through to Secondary V. A common public culture is the medium through which the educational process is filtered. We have at our disposal a bank of references and implicit values which enable students to understand the role of education in their lives and in their overall development as human beings. But in light of the current situation in which socioeconomic uncertainty, ideological plurality, moral relativism, and misgivings about the future are unfortunate facts of life, these implicit values no longer suffice. This is why we feel compelled to provide a clear definition of what we want the education system to be and do for our children. Success in school, in the fullest sense of the word, depends largely on how well the educational mission meshes with the culture it shares. It should provide a solid anchor for children and teenagers as they overcome the many difficulties that may accompany their educational journey. The following sections describe two important features of a common public culture for Québec schools.

1. This expression is taken from an unpublished article by Glenn Smith entitled *Vers un nouveau pacte laïc*.

1. Parental responsibility in education

Our argument is based on the premise that parents are the people primarily responsible for their children's education. Since it is impossible for parents to take on this task single-handedly, they delegate part of it to the education system. This is not tantamount to parents relinquishing their role as "prime educators" because the act, of conferring some of the responsibility to the state, is a voluntary one. The will of parents to decide the direction they wish their children's education to take is an inviolable right which must be respected. A common public culture for Québec schools must be based on this respect for the will of parents in educational matters. In concrete terms, this means that insofar as they are public institutions, schools must above all be at the service of parents and their children.

Recognition of parental rights, a self-evident truth for many, is seriously jeopardized in the current confessional debate, at least as interpreted by the Commission for the Estates General on Education, despite the fact that a majority of Quebecers are in favour of maintaining some form of religious education in schools and of preserving the option between moral or moral and religious education, while granting special confessional status to schools². Furthermore, most briefs on confessionality submitted to the Commission for the Estates General on Education are in favour of preserving the confessionality of certain aspects of the education system³. What other possible explanation is there for the Commission's decision to recommend that moral and religious education be dropped from the curriculum and that religious animation no longer be provided in schools? The members of the Protestant Committee reject such an extreme proposal which flies in the face of the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and the Education Act. We firmly believe that parents are ultimately responsible for their children's education, that parents want religion to play a role in public schools, and that it is critical that their will be respected.

2. The role of religion in public schools

By definition, secularism implies the division of Church and State. However, separation does not preclude cooperation in certain areas of the public sphere, such as education. Collaboration does not mean State support of any one particular religion, as some purists would have us believe. In fact, the poor attendance at church services for the last three decades shows that the cooperation of Church and State in education has not promoted the growth of the Church. On the contrary, public schools have benefitted greatly from the work of those providing pastoral care and guidance over the past thirty years. Religion has played a decisive role in helping

2. Based on surveys by SOM – La Presse – and Télé-Québec in 1996, Léger et Léger in June 1996, and La Presse – Radio-Québec in October 1995.

3. Between 57% and 63% of the briefs, depending on whether ambivalent or neutral briefs are factored in. See the final report of the Commission for the Estates General on Education, *Renewing our Education System: Ten Priority Actions*, p. 69.

immigrant families integrate into the school community. Most newly-established Quebecers are Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox⁴. Those outside the Judeo-Christian tradition benefit from becoming familiar with this fundamental force that has shaped Québec society⁵.

Subsumed under the role of religion in a common public culture is the question of educational values. Can education occur without recourse to accepted values that closely resemble, if not at times mirror, religious ones? It is impossible to disregard the religious fact in planning and teaching academic programs, in learning and in integrating the various subject areas. The educational process at every level ultimately involves basic values. Whatever else it may be, secular teaching is never completely removed from religion, nor should it be, because teaching entirely devoid of values is in danger of lacking the ethical content that helps to deter unacceptable behaviour within society.

If, then, religion is unavoidable, how should it be approached in schools? We are convinced that the Protestant moral and religious education program is the model that successfully integrates the religious fact into a pluralistic context. The program includes values that are important to our society and encourages students to be attuned to their spiritual dimension and to develop the required critical faculties for assimilating this facet of the human experience. Protestant moral and religious education is informative, not doctrinal. It is not taught along denominational lines with a view to rallying students to its cause. Rather, it teaches about religions and about the values that are important in Québec society.

The study of religion necessarily involves an examination of value systems and of their underlying world views. It is impossible to analyze a religion without consciously or unconsciously tapping into one's own convictions. While teachers and animators should aim for as much objectivity as possible, it is also critical that students be able to relate their own personal development to the content of the moral and religious education program. We believe there is a place for dialogue on religion in a common public culture for Québec schools.

It is imperative that the dialogue occur in a climate of respect for differences and in a spirit of affirmation and celebration of shared values, while at the same time addressing the values deemed unacceptable within Québec society. Pluralism and ideological relativity in no way preclude the value judgements required for confronting situations that are morally intolerable. It is therefore crucial that the Judeo-Christian tradition which undergirds Québec society be emphasized. Québec's cultural, ethnic and religious diversity should not dilute our convictions and values. Certain other aspects of pluralism should, however, be integrated at the structural level.

4. Data taken from records on student numbers for 1995 and 1996 on student distribution on the basis of mother tongue and religion in Québec school boards indicate that 54.3% of allophones come from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds. If newly-arrived Quebecers whose mother tongue is either French or English and who are Christian are factored in, it can be said unequivocally that most new Quebecers are Christian.

5. MAALOUF, Sami. Face à la diversité dans l'enseignement religieux in *Œcuménisme, La prochaine génération: la religion dans les écoles*, 31st year, no. 121, March 1996, pp. 23-25.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has made Québec a hospitable society for newcomers. The influence of religion in the history of education in Québec sets it apart from countries like France. A hundred years ago, French Protestants advocated complete secularization of the education system in order to protect minorities from an ostensibly all-inclusive educational regime. Today we can see the disastrous effects of this measure. Experts on the question have amply demonstrated that “the absence of religious education in public schools in the last century has largely contributed to the lack of understanding of the religious fact in European art and culture⁶”. In contrast, the Québec education system should be proud of its open-mindedness and sensitivity to the religious phenomenon.

In light of all of the above, the Protestant Committee rejects the Commission for the Estates General on Education’s proposal to replace moral and religious education with civics and a cultural approach to the study of religion. First, because it is difficult to construct an informed opinion as to the value of a program that would replace existing ones when the contents are not yet known. Second, the Protestant Committee firmly believes that the Protestant moral and religious education program is already perfectly in keeping with the Commission’s imperative of “making inroads in teaching values⁷”. We are also convinced that religious animation is needed to promote dialogue on values and to foster students’ overall development. We oppose the replacement of religious animation services with civics-oriented services which have yet to be defined.

6. Danielle Hervieu-Léger quoted by Glenn Smith in the unpublished article, *op. cit.*, free translation.

7. Taken from the Commission for the Estates General on Education’s final report, *op. cit.*

CONCLUSION

We believe that it is undesirable to dismantle entirely the confessional system in favour of a blanket solution for all Québec schools. However, we do concede that individual schools could adopt an educational project that best reflects the needs expressed by the community, be they confessional or secular. The role of school boards would therefore be to respect and promote the achievement of the educational mission of public schools and to provide the various professional and administrative services⁸. If a school chose to pursue the confessional route based on the express will of a majority of the parents, a new arrangement could be developed between the school and the Ministère de l'Éducation's Protestant or Catholic Services for the creation of the project. This means that bodies such as the Protestant Committee of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation as well as the office of the Protestant Associate Deputy Minister and Protestant Educational Services of the Ministère de l'Éducation would have to be maintained in order to ensure the quality and development of confessional services in schools. We also believe that all public schools in Québec must offer students, parents, and teachers the option of either moral and religious education or moral education. Should a school opt for the former, this should not interfere with the achievement of the primary mission of public schools: to serve a vast array of clientele. The rights of all stakeholders - students, parents, and teachers - must be respected and supported by the education community. To create a harmonious society, the heterogeneous character of our educational system must be maintained. Standards that will reflect what we expect of a public school, i.e. that is open to all, provides the option to choose, and mirrors the community, must be established. The biggest challenge that the education system will have to face in the year 2000 is to fashion unity out of diversity.

8. Taken from Glenn Smith's article.

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