



A NEW PLACE
FOR RELIGION
I N T H E
S C H O O L S

Québec 
Comité catholique
et
Comité protestant

A NEW PLACE FOR RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS

In recent years, religious education in the schools has been called into question, a process that culminated in the Estates General of 1995, the publication of the Proulx report and the subsequent parliamentary commission, in 1999. The debate led to the amendment of the Education Act through Bill 118 and, in the near future, a new basic school regulation will define some of the terms and conditions of its implementation. As a result of all this, the framework and context governing religious education in the schools have changed considerably.

These decisions have been born of compromise. The many voices demanding that religious education be maintained in the schools have not fallen on deaf ears, nor have the demands for change, as witnessed notably by the introduction of major structural and institutional modifications. Given the fact that views were diametrically opposed, unanimity was impossible. Consequently, the Act elicits a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment in both camps. However, respect for the democratic process now demands a collective effort to implement these decisions as constructively as possible.

As they prepare to relegate their responsibilities to other bodies, the Catholic Committee and the Protestant Committee wish, through this publication, to support all those who value and seek to accomplish the school's mission with regard to moral, spiritual and religious education. It contains thoughts on how this education contributes to young people's development and on matters related to implementation in the context of the current reform.

1 RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

A shared responsibility

Whereas the prime responsibility for introducing children to moral and religious values lies with the family, the faith community provides an environment for nourishing personal commitment to faith and for expressing that commitment in different ways. The new context created by Bill 118 highlights the unique responsibility of families and Christian communities in supporting those young people who show an interest in the journey of faith.

In this context, the school will continue to play an important role where religious education is concerned. In keeping with its teaching and socialization mandate, it provides young people with means for learning about their religion and about worldviews that differ from their own, for deliberating about the meaning of life in an enlightened manner, and for clarifying their personal convictions. By making a place for such education in the schools, the Education Act reflects a demand that is widespread within the Québec population.



How can the teaching of Christianity benefit young people?

The Education Act continues to assert the right of Catholic and Protestant students to a religious education associated with the Christian tradition. Over and above this legal base, it is important to clearly understand the educational objectives of this teaching, namely, to promote young people's personal, social and cultural development while helping them make their own ethical and religious choices.

SUPPORT FOR PERSONAL GROWTH AND SOCIALIZATION

KNOWLEDGE OF THE VALUES conveyed by Christian humanism and illustrated by the great witnesses of the spiritual experience can underpin both young people's individual growth and their citizenship education.

- A sense of the world's beauty, the dignity of all people, inner freedom and striving to go beyond personal gratification, for example, are factors of personal growth conveyed by the Christian tradition.
- The spirit of service and solidarity, the desire for justice, an active concern for those who are excluded or hurt, all help to ensure that life in society is not simply a matter of commercial relations or the strong dominating the weak
- Learning about the religion in which young people have grown up helps shape their identity. Just as every journey has a starting point, so does the spiritual search. It begins in our place of birth, in a specific family, cultural and historical context. It has a preliminary set of references and benchmarks without which it would flounder. Affirming identity need not

create barriers between people; on the contrary, it is necessary for a genuine encounter with others.

- Although they are centred on the Christian tradition, programs of moral and religious education also draw on different religious, scientific and humanist world-views. This discipline thus helps prepare young people for living together in a pluralist society, in a spirit of critical awareness, openness and mutual respect.
- The desire for inner growth is constantly confronted by all manner of obstacles and contradictions. Religious education enables young people to discover how the spiritual experience can support courage and hope in this demanding search, as shown by numerous individuals throughout history.

CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION has a significant cultural dimension, seeking to awaken young people to their own spiritual heritage, but also to that of other religions.

- Without a solid knowledge of Christianity and its place in Western history, arts and culture, young people would be lacking indispensable keys for understanding their history and cultural environment. Without an introduction to the stories, symbols and customs imparted by Christianity, how could one appreciate the works of Bach, Mozart, Michelangelo or Claudel, understand the full import of the story of Joan of Arc or the pioneers of Québec, decode street and village names, or comprehend certain popular traditions?



- Introducing young people to different religious traditions enables them to discover and understand other cultures and worldviews. Since the various spiritual traditions converge in their search for common ideals, they can bring people closer together on a deeper level.
- Religious education also promotes the development of symbolic thought through Biblical tales, iconography and the different signs through which spiritual realities can be manifested. This inner capacity is indispensable for understanding the world of music, dance, painting and poetry, for example, and also for being able to express that part of ourselves that goes beyond abstract reasoning: our emotions, imagination, and sense of wonder at the beauty of the world.

DEVELOPMENT OF AUTONOMY

THE DECISION TO EMBRACE religious wisdom or not ensues from our personal freedom. To be fully exercised, this freedom must be based on knowledge. Existing programs of religious education are designed to give young people the tools they need to direct their lives, by helping them to consciously situate themselves vis-à-vis fundamental religious questions.

History shows us how, in the name of religion, all manner of abuses have been perpetrated. We must recognize these deviations as well as the contribution religion has made to civilization and humanity's development. Religious education in the schools must help young people to critically judge the different facets of their own religious tradition just as they do other worldviews. In keeping with the modern perspective of all academic education, religious education also helps to form an "individual", someone who is not a gullible, passive victim of circumstance and propaganda, but who finds and fashions a meaning for his or her life.

How much time should be devoted to religious education?

The Minister of Education has published the government's intentions related to teaching time in the document *Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations* (May 2000), which proposes reorganizing the time devoted to religious education. The breakdown of teaching time for each subject remains to be confirmed by the new basic school regulation to be established in the months to come. However, certain elements are already in place.

The time slated for religious education as of September 2001 will depend on two things: 1) the *basic school regulation's* indications concerning the timetable, 2) the *decisions taken by each governing board* in the area in which the Act gives it a certain amount of latitude in implementing the basic school regulation.

At the elementary level, for religious education, as for various other subjects (art, physical education, second language, natural science and technology, history, geography and citizenship), the basic school regulation leaves an amount of so-called "unallotted" time to be divided up locally. For religious education and these other disciplines, this time slot could vary from a minimum to an average divided among them. Based on the hypothesis of a proportional distribution between the disciplines in question, the time for moral and religious education could well remain in the vicinity of one and a half hours (two periods) per week.

There is good reason not to limit ourselves to the strict minimum in allocating teaching time for moral and religious education. The discipline actually covers two fields,



ethics and religion, each of which has substantial requirements. Moreover, the Catholic and Protestant programs of studies have developed the discipline's cultural content and include an interfaith component as essential learning. Further, this discipline is designed to support young people in the difficult process of seeking meaning, through an approach that is ongoing and, consequently, requires a sufficient degree of continuity over time.

At the secondary level, the governing board is responsible for deciding on time allocation in both cycles and on the type of program available in the first cycle. Although the overall standard stipulated in the Act remains the choice between moral education or Catholic/Protestant moral and religious education, in certain particular school environments, this could lead to these options being replaced, in the first cycle, by a local ethics and religious culture program or an ecumenical program. Clearly, recourse to the alternatives permitted under the Act presupposes determining what the students' parents desire.

In the second cycle, the Minister has indicated that the entire time allotted to moral and religious education will be devoted to a program of "ethics and religious culture". The governing board is responsible for determining when, in the cycle, the time allocated to this instruction is integrated.

Among the hypothetical time breakdowns that can be envisaged by the governing board, any arrangement that might generate systematic discrimination linked to a religious choice should be avoided. Such discrimination would, in fact, be incompatible with the right to religious freedom. For instance, the schools should not make an optional course, and an interesting one at that, available only to students enrolled either in moral and religious education, moral education or ethics and religious culture.

A valuable task

In affirming that schools "shall, in particular, facilitate the spiritual development of students so as to promote self-fulfilment" (Bill 118, s. 19), the government situates the relevance and legitimacy of religious education in the schools in the context of the public schools' educational mission. Consequently, it is important for those responsible for this education to be able to dispense it confidently and serenely. Their work meets a deep-seated need among young people that warrants the utmost respect and may constitute a highly enriching experience.

The experience and comments of many teachers allude to the fact that the deliberation occasioned by religious education may provide an excellent opportunity for communication with the students. The latter are more receptive to the new programs of study in which issues that preoccupy them are discussed. The light shed on these issues by contemporary Christian thought often renews one's own understanding in a surprising manner. Discovering the vitality of the current religious culture may prove stimulating for the teachers themselves.

Religious education in the schools is not an introductory catechesis or an attempt at conversion. Although it has a theological basis, it is not a discourse in theological scholarship. What, then, are the skills expected of moral and religious education teachers?

The traces of one's own initiation, as a child and adolescent, into the world of religion are insufficient for providing religious education. Teaching religion requires being sufficiently familiar with the world of religious meaning and the light it sheds on critical contemporary and world issues. In religious education, as in other subjects, young people need intermediaries, interpreters, i.e. credible individuals, able to start them on their way, clear away the underbrush and



help them blaze various trails. An *adult religious culture* is clearly best suited to this role and to promoting the consolidation of professional skills giving rise to a teaching method that is appropriate for this type of instruction.¹

¹ Teachers may refer to the recent publication that the Catholic Committee wished to leave the academic community as a token of thanks for its work with young people: *The New Outlook for Religious Education in the Schools* (August 2000).

2 SPIRITUAL ANIMATION AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Pastoral or religious animation will, henceforth, be replaced by a service of spiritual animation and community involvement offered to students of different beliefs and denominations. The aims of this service are described as follows in the Minister's policy paper: "The service could offer a variety of humanitarian, spiritual, interfaith or religious activities based on young people's search for meaning, the students' needs with respect to their own religious affiliation, the development of a social conscience, the humanization of the environment and community involvement" (*Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations*, p. 15). In its own way, this service will enable a good many of the above-mentioned objectives for religious education to be pursued.

The terms and conditions for dispensing this service are, however, still being defined. The governing boards will have to pay particular attention to the following.

- The Act stipulates that this service constitutes a student right, thereby clearly reflecting the importance accorded it. The extent to which pastoral and religious animation was valued as a source of support for student growth and humanization of the school environment is well known. Hopefully, the same will be true for the spiritual animation and community involvement



service. To this end, it would not be enough to confine oneself to a minimalist interpretation of the legal requirements. Such may have been the tendency in recent years, in a context of cutbacks and uncertainty as to the future of religious education in the schools. This context has changed. The place of religion in the school has been clarified and the government will bear all of the costs of spiritual animation at both the elementary and secondary levels. As a result, it should be possible to provide some stability and valid conditions for dispensing this service, notably in terms of the time demanded of those responsible for it and the ratios deemed appropriate.

- The qualifications required of those responsible for dispensing this service will include their "ability to be accepted and recognized by the various religious groups and faiths represented in the school". How this is to be achieved remains to be determined. Those in charge will have to accord it capital importance in order to ensure that the service remains credible for the parents of all students.
- Even if the service as such has no specific denominational connotation, it is clear that activities related to different faiths could be organized within it. The parents and students themselves could express their expectations in this regard.

The Minister announced that this service would be implemented in September 2001 in secondary schools and one year later in elementary schools. This transition period is welcome in the eyes of the Catholic and Protestant committees. It should allow those in charge to determine how the service should be adjusted to students' needs, parents' expectations, the community's unique traits and the features specific to the different levels of instruction.

THE SCHOOL'S VALUES AND PARENTAL CHOICE

3

Since Bill 118 abolished the possibility of parents' demanding a confessional status or a specific project of a religious nature for the public school their children attend, a means of maintaining their ability to influence the values and aims of their local school must be found.

This orientation is stated in the *educational project or mission statement*, through which the school outlines its vision, defines its values and determines the means it intends to implement to attain its goals. We know that an establishment's institutional culture constitutes a critical factor in its quality or mediocrity. The more widely shared and clearly stated the values promoted by an establishment, the more they can contribute to the dynamism of the educational project.

From this viewpoint, the parents' role on the governing board will be critical. Given the importance of the educational project development process, it might be necessary to offer the parents of all students the opportunity to voice their views on the subject of the orientation of the school their children attend, as provided for in the Education Act (s. 74). It will be up to each governing board to find effective means to ensure that parents are able to express these views.

WHAT FUTURE?

The many parents demanding that their children receive religious education in public schools are expressing an expectation that remains legitimate in the Québec system as in the great majority of Western nations. This legitimacy is based on a parental right, as recognized in Québec's Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (s. 41). It is further reinforced by the fact that school is considered not a mere instrument of the State, but a component of civil society answering both to the community and the State. The right to religious education in the schools is also based on a policy of recognizing cultural and religious diversity in the public forum, a fact which avoids shifting the expression of this diversity to the private sector.

That which is allowed in terms of principles and the Education Act should now be made possible by creating favourable conditions. The responsibility for doing so will be shared between governing boards, school staff, school boards and the Ministère de l'Éducation. While the framework defined by Bill 118 poses a real threat of fragilization, it also entails the potential for renewal. It will require more deliberate choices, and exact better-defined commitments from us as individuals and as a society. The Act alone will never be able to guarantee the future, much less the vitality, of a service such as religious education. This requires the determination of adults convinced that this service is important for the young people they are responsible for accompanying as they start out in life. The future of religion in the school is, first and foremost, in their hands.

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