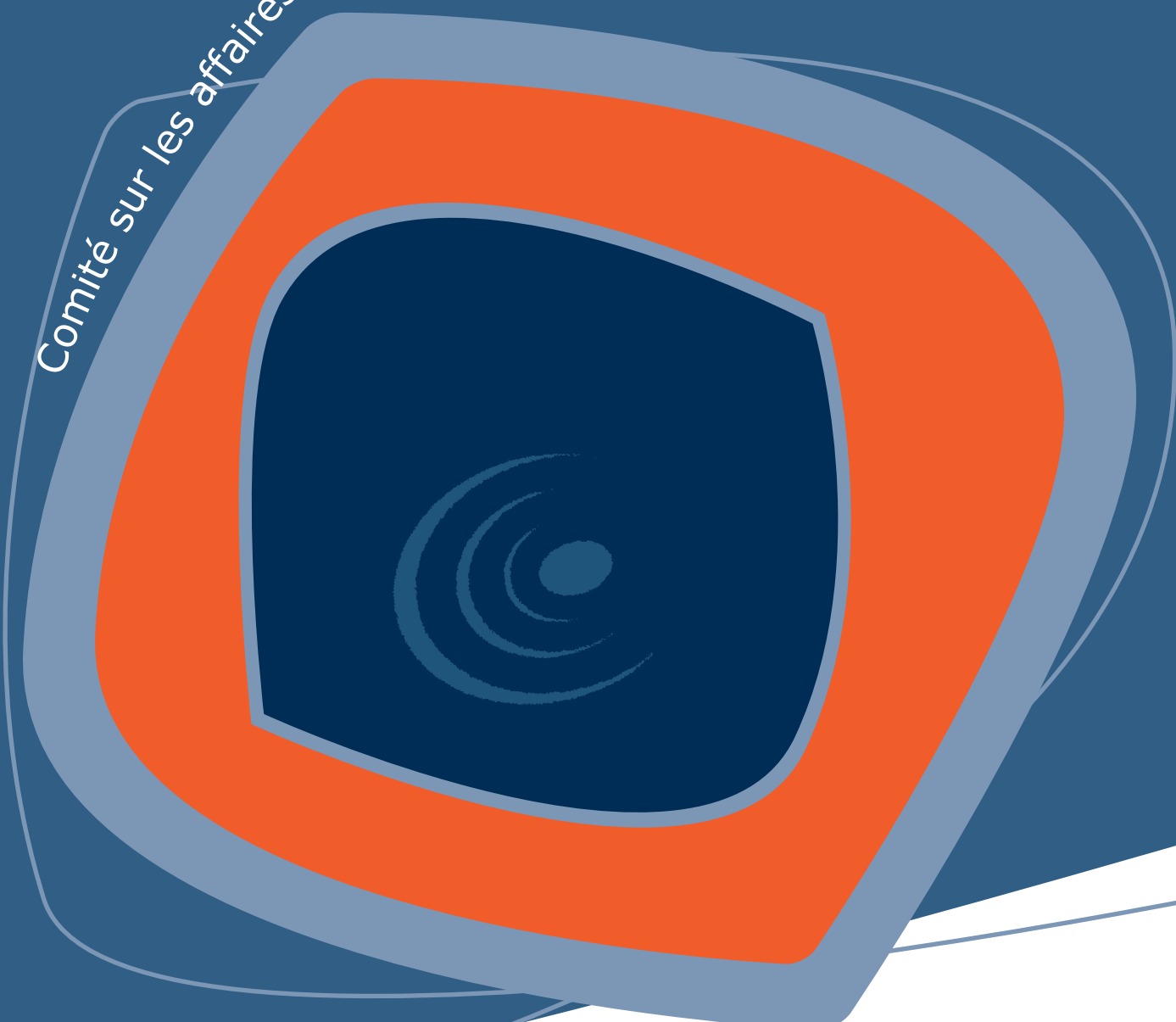


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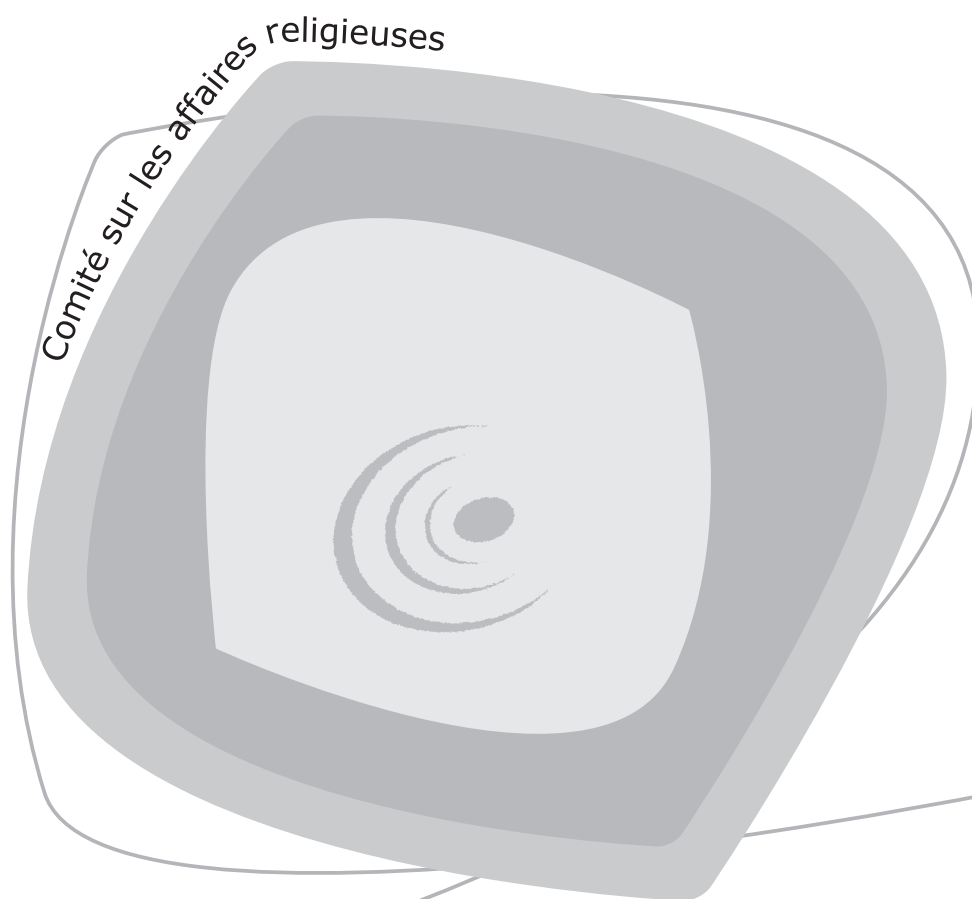


## Secular Schools in Québec

A Necessary Change in Institutional Culture

Brief to the Minister of Education,  
Recreation and Sports  
October 2006

Québec 



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Brief adopted at the 41st meeting  
of the Comité sur les affaires religieuses,  
June 15 and 16, 2006  
(See Appendix for list of Committee members)

**Supervision**

Roger Boisvert  
Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses

**Coordination**

Louise Tanguay  
Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses  
Lorraine Leduc  
Comité sur les affaires religieuses

**Author**

Christine Cadrin-Pelletier

**Research**

Alain Ratté  
Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses

**Translation**

Direction de la production en langue anglaise  
Secteur des services à la communauté anglophone  
Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport

**Acknowledgements**

The Comité sur les affaires religieuses would like to express its gratitude to Christine Cadrin-Pelletier, Secretary of Religious Affairs prior to June 2005, for helping the Committee to establish the new model of secular schooling in Québec, and for facilitating an understanding of its implications.

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Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2007—06-01213

ISBN : 978-2-550-48044-0 (Version imprimée)

ISBN : 978-2-550-48045-7 (PDF)

Legal Deposit – Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

The government of Québec is currently engaged in deconfessionalizing the province's education system, a process that has taken about 10 years. From a legal perspective, this process, which really began with the creation of linguistic school boards in 1998,<sup>1</sup> will be completed in September 2008 with the introduction of an Ethics and Religious Culture Program<sup>2</sup> intended for all elementary and secondary school students. In the interim, Bill 118,<sup>3</sup> adopted in 2000, has made considerable changes to the denominational school system.

The new legislative framework surrounding Québec public schools conveys the State's neutrality with respect to religion. Open to the student's spiritual development,<sup>4</sup> this framework makes room for the diversity of religious traditions within schools while respecting the "freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents and the school staff"<sup>5</sup> and without favouring any particular religious or secular perspective.

However, the equivocal nature of the decisions made in 2000, coupled with the speed at which the denominational system of school boards was dismantled, have contributed to misunderstanding and unease with respect to the place of religion in the schools. In this context, the reference to students' spiritual development in the *Education Act* has also generated certain reactions. Many people are unsure about the meaning and scope of these realities and the responsibilities they entail for Québec's public schools.

This is why, when making the shift to nondenominational school boards, the then Minister of Education, François Legault, made the following request to the Comité sur les affaires religieuses:

I am counting on the Committee's collaboration to enlighten me about the ways in which Quebecers' expectations have changed in relation to various questions pertaining to the place of religion in the schools. I am thinking particularly of how the public schools, which are now nondenominational, might carry out the new mandate conferred on them by section 36 of the [*Education Act*], which states that schools shall

1. *Bill 109*, adopted on June 19, 1997. The change came into effect in July 1998.
2. *Bill 95*, adopted on June 15, 2005.
3. Adopted on June 14, this bill abrogated the denominational status of Québec schools by abolishing the Catholic and Protestant committees of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation. It also amended the *Education Act* to create the Comité sur les affaires religieuses, and provided for the establishment of a complementary spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service. At the same time, however, it maintained the system of options that enabled parents of elementary school and Secondary Cycle One students to choose between Moral Education, Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction and Protestant Moral and Religious Education. See s. 2.3.
4. Bill 118 added a provision to section 36 of the *Education Act*, which stipulates that the school "shall, in particular, facilitate the spiritual development of students so as to promote self-fulfilment."
5. *Education Act*, R.S.Q., c. I-13.3, s. 37.

“facilitate the spiritual development of students” while respecting freedom of conscience and religion. In the context of the religious pluralism that is now a fact of Québec society, this new way of doing things calls for a change in institutional culture, something that a brief from the Committee would clarify.<sup>6</sup>

The Committee has drafted the present brief in response to this request. Intended to foster a better understanding of the changes currently under way, the brief looks at the issues surrounding the adoption of a new institutional culture in the context of Québec’s open and secular public school system. A later document will provide a more detailed picture of the Committee’s ideas with respect to the conditions that must be created in order to facilitate students’ spiritual development within the school environment.

To understand what is meant by the expression “change in institutional culture,” the first thing to keep in mind is that the term “institutional,” as used here, refers to the Québec public school system. Although the term “culture” is often associated with the domain of artistic and literary creation, it is used in a much broader sense in this brief:

Sociologists and anthropologists consider culture to be the whole of the environment humanized by a group. This encompasses the group’s way of understanding the world, of perceiving human beings and their destiny, of working, entertaining itself, expressing itself through the arts, transforming nature using its techniques and inventions [...] Culture is also the mindset typically acquired by every individual who identifies with a group: it constitutes our human heritage as transmitted from generation to generation. Every community endowed with a certain degree of permanence has its own culture.<sup>7</sup>

This is the concept the Committee is referring to when it speaks of a change in institutional culture. To the extent to which it is intended to be a community with a certain degree of permanence, the Québec public school system produces a typical sort of mentality, an institutional culture of its own. Thus the school is not only the reflection of the culture in which it is inscribed, it also creates a way of thinking and acting that is all its own. In other words, culturally speaking, Québec public schools can be defined as both “a legacy and a work in progress.”<sup>8</sup>

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6. Letter from the Minister of Education to the Comité sur les affaires religieuses, February 28, 2001. [Free translation]

7. Hervé Carrier, *Lexique de la culture. Pour l'analyse culturelle et l'inculturation* (Tournai–Louvain-la-Neuve: Desclée, 1992), 101-102. [Free translation]

8. This expression was favoured by the sociologist Fernand Dumont. [Free translation]

In a previous brief,<sup>9</sup> the Committee used the term “secular” to describe the new model for Québec public schools and to justify this choice. It is of the opinion that this term more adequately conveys the reality of Québec schools today in their relationship to the phenomenon of religion, especially since the Québec government decided, in 2005, to replace denominational instruction—previously an option, along with moral education—with a single Ethics and Religious Culture Program. Thus, as far as the Committee is concerned, the concept of “secular schools” refers to respect for freedom of conscience and religion, equal treatment for all in religious matters, the school’s neutrality in the management of religious pluralism, and its educational role with respect to students’ spiritual development and their religion-related questions. This concept of secular schools does not preclude one’s being attentive to different viewpoints expressed by the public as a whole. While some people believe that the secular nature of public schools requires that they keep religion outside their walls, others would like to go back to a denominational model of school/state relationships in the public system.

Through this brief, the Committee would like to help clarify the major shift that has occurred in Québec schools with respect to religion and academic life. In the hope of constructing a common base of understanding that school staff can draw upon when dealing with religious and spiritual issues, the Committee considers it essential to look at the scope of the changes that Québec’s schools have undergone in such a short period.

In other words, the Committee wishes to provide the schools with a tool for reflection, something that can help them identify the cultural issues associated with the abrogation of legal provisions for denominational education, and interpret the legal framework defining the Québec model for secular schools. How should we understand the educational and social objectives behind the secularization of public schools? What do these entail for school stakeholders? The Committee will try to answer these questions, which persist in the school community.

The Committee intends to look at the evolution of the school system and the questions that this has generated from the perspective of those caught up in the change. Thus the events that provided the context for the creation of secular schools will be related, not so much to establish the sequence of events as to reflect the state of mind of the different people who have experienced them. The Committee hopes that this psychosocial reading of the historical process

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9. Comité sur les Affaires Religieuses, *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools: The Educational Challenges of Diversity*, Brief to the Minister of Education (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2003), 13-28. Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools in Québec, *Religion in Secular Schools: A New Perspective for Québec* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1999).

that has led to the creation of open and secular schools will make it possible to obtain an inside view of the experience of students and school staff involved.

Taking into account the wide range of situations that exist in Québec schools will make it possible to evaluate how far we still have to go to develop an institutional culture that satisfies the educational aims driving this systemic process. The development of this institutional culture in Québec public schools is not going to happen on its own. It will require, rather, a lucid appraisal of the past and present, as well as a commitment shared by all the parties concerned. This change in institutional culture will enable them to give concrete expression to a secular school model that is consistent with an inclusive society, one that is open to religious and spiritual experience and respectful of the rights and freedoms of one and all.

In pursuing these objectives, the Committee will devote the first chapter of this brief to an overview of the diversity of institutional cultures that existed in the denominational school system before Bill 118. In chapter two, it will analyze the shift away from denominational school boards, which has taken place amid uncertainty and confusion. The Committee feels that this historical digression, which may seem a bit heavy for some, is necessary for an understanding of the issues specific to the Québec model of an open, secular school system. The model itself will be covered in the third and last chapter, where the Committee presents the five structural elements that make the model coherent, and highlights why it is important to integrate it in each community.

The Committee is aware that this historical overview of the Québec school system could be expanded on and further clarified. However brief it may be, this overview provides an apt illustration of the ongoing adjustments that these changes have required, and will continue to require, from individuals and institutions.



## CHAPTER 1

### THE DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEM: DIVERSE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES

The institutional culture of the Québec public school system was highly diversified prior to the shift away from the denominational school system. The denominational and linguistic duality of the school boards, the regional disparities and the differences in mentality the elementary and secondary schools were such that there was no uniform approach to religion in the schools, despite the existence of legislation common to all Catholic public schools (promulgated by the Catholic Committee of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation) and specific to all Protestant schools (defined by the Protestant Committee of the same Conseil supérieur). The creation of a secular school system grew out of a highly diverse set of circumstances involving very different institutional cultures.

#### 1.1 The Denominational and Linguistic Duality of the Québec School System

Until the late 1990s, two quite distinct views of denominational schools coexisted in Québec. Eschewing the level of detail that a comprehensive report would entail, the Committee has decided to limit itself to certain trends in the Catholic and Protestant systems in order to show how much progress has been made toward the recognition of secular schools.

The denominational school system of the Catholic francophone majority was solidly established, hierarchical and structured. It maintained strong links with the Catholic episcopate and recognized the authority of the Catholic Committee and the Associate Deputy Minister for the Catholic Faith.<sup>10</sup> The legal provisions for denominational education in the *Education Act* and the attendant regulations, as well as the established orientations for educational services dispensed within the context of Catholic religious and moral instruction and pastoral care and guidance, were officially respected—even if they were often sidestepped in practice. The Catholic Committee and the Associate Deputy Minister could call upon professional resource people<sup>11</sup> capable of supporting the Catholic system and keeping denominational schooling abreast of the times, as well as upon a network of people who served as liaisons with the regions (regional representatives of Catholic instruction) and the school boards (Christian education consultants).

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10. Only once has a woman held this position (1995 to 2000).

11. The chair and secretary of the Catholic Committee were full-time employees. The Deputy Minister's team, i.e. the Direction de l'enseignement catholique, was comprised of a director and professional and secretarial staff. The administrative structure of the Protestant Committee was identical to that of the Catholic Committee.

Integrated throughout the school system, these structures enabled denominational Catholic instruction to hold sway to a degree that some would come to consider increasingly questionable, or even unjustified.

Aware of the socioreligious evolution of Québec's population, the Catholic Committee concerned itself with the wishes and reality of its communities and wanted corresponding recognition for the Catholic status of the schools it served. To achieve this objective, a legal framework provided for periodic evaluation<sup>12</sup> of the denominational experience. Surprisingly, however, this process did not lead most Québec schools to reject their denominational status. Everything seems to suggest that the Catholic status of public schools constituted a sort of framework that many saw as culturally accepted or acceptable.

Moreover, the denominational status of the schools serving the minority Protestant community was very discreet in practice, due to the respect accorded to each person's autonomy in religious matters and to the presence of many religious minorities in the Protestant schools. Thus the Protestant denominational system, which was mainly anglophone, was subject to few controls and left up to the schools communities. The Protestant Committee and the Associate Deputy Minister for the Protestant Faith derived their authority from the representatives of several Protestant churches, and exercised it mainly in accordance with a compromise that made room for both the promotion of certain Protestant values and the teaching of certain content dealing, for the most part, with the Bible and with different religions and currents of humanist and atheistic thought. There were no regional or local structures to serve as links to the Protestant schools. The professional staff at the Direction de l'enseignement protestant, in conjunction with educational consultants employed by the school boards, looked after teacher training.

Thus two quite distinct conceptions of denominational schools could be observed all the way from the highest echelons of the school system down to individual schools, and these differences extended to orientations, work methods and styles of intervention that operated more or less independently in each system. The school boards did not establish the same type of relationship to religion, did not offer the same moral and religious education, and did not

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12. This evaluation takes place every five years.

share a similar conception of the schools' responsibility with regard to pastoral or religious care and guidance.<sup>13</sup>

These differences must be seen in relation to the obvious numeric discrepancy between the two school systems. The following figures pertaining to the distribution of the school population between the two main denominational groups provide an overview of the situation at different times.<sup>14</sup>

<i>Distribution of the two groups throughout Québec</i>	<i>Catholics</i>	<i>Protestants</i>
1961 Census	88.3 %	8.6 %
1971 Census	87.1 %	8.4 %
1981 Census	88.2 %	6.0 %
1991 Census	86.1 %	5.2 %

Data taken by the Direction de l'enseignement catholique from the *Declaration of Attendance at School* for February 1999 indicate that, for Québec as a whole, 84.9% of the population identified itself as Catholic, while 4.39% identified themselves as Protestant.<sup>15</sup> These differences require different types of organization.

Setting aside this discrepancy, we will compare these two management cultures by starting with the debate generated by the Estates General on Education in 1995-1996. The Catholic organizational structure had come to seem more and more cumbersome to local administrators eager for autonomy, and excessive in the eyes of teachers and other professionals who did not have comparable support frameworks at their disposal. Moreover, the teachers' unions considered such structures outmoded, given the fact that Quebecers had distanced themselves somewhat from Catholicism. In 1990, the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec<sup>16</sup> had published a study on the secularization of the school system,<sup>17</sup> a development the Centrale would actively promote by progressively joining forces with a number of other union and civil organizations.<sup>18</sup> Thus the points of disagreement that would lead to the dismantling of the

13. Christine Cadrin-Pelletier, "L'éducation à la diversité religieuse dans le système québécois: Modifications systémiques et enjeux culturels entre majorité et minorités religieuses," in Solange Lefebvre ed., *La religion dans la sphère publique* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2005), 92-115. Collection Paramètres.

14. Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools in Québec, *Religion in Secular Schools: A New Perspective for Québec* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1999).

15. These data are taken from the *Declaration of Attendance at School* (DAS).

16. The Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec (CEQ) has since become the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ).

17. This study was conducted by Jocelyn Berthelot, a researcher with the CEQ. See: Jocelyn Berthelot, *Une école de son temps: Un horizon démocratique pour l'école et le collège* (Montréal: Éditions Saint-Martin/CEQ, 1994).

18. A coalition for the deconfessionalization of the school system bringing together some 50 organizations would be created and would remain active until 2005.

denominational system were already in place. Often without the knowledge of large segments of the population, the idea of “taking religion out of the schools” was gaining support among school staff.

The Protestant system, on the other hand, seemed more in tune with contemporary ways of thinking. It recognized individual autonomy in religious matters, which made it easier to welcome religious diversity, and gave extensive leeway to local administrators. The Direction de l’enseignement protestant, for its part, provided service directly to its teachers. The changes anticipated in this sector were not so much at the denominational level but, rather, at the linguistic level.

The merging of school boards in the wake of the decision, made in 1998, to switch from the denominational system to a linguistic system resulted in a management culture shock among administrators and an institutional culture shock within schools.<sup>19</sup> Some groups, particularly in the anglophone community,<sup>20</sup> reacted bitterly as school staff and students from Catholic, Protestant and other religious backgrounds were grouped in the same institutions and had to learn how to work together. This disparity of linguistic and denominational institutional cultures was the soil in which the future open and secular system would take root.

The time had come for the school community to take stock of the tensions inherent in the system and to dispel the ambiguity surrounding the arduous task of reconciling the schools’ public and denominational dimensions. Moreover, with more voices raised on behalf of rights, the denominational privileges that Catholics and Protestants had historically enjoyed were becoming more and more problematic.

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19. “[Culture shock] refers to any event or experience that calls cultural stability into question ... [Its] effects are negative or positive to the extent that the social groups it affects are able to integrate it into a new synthesis.” See Hervé Carrier, S.J., *Lexique de la culture: Pour l’analyse culturelle et l’inculturation* (Tournai-Louvain-la-Neuve: Desclée, 1992), 70-71. [Free translation]

20. Unlike most French Catholic schools, whose confessional character was more symbolic than anything else, some English Catholic schools affirmed their confessional character by celebrating Mass in the school and by having priests serve as pastoral animators. The few evangelical French Protestant schools that did exist were dissolved in accordance with section 240 of the *Education Act* (modified in 2000), which prohibits schools from pursuing specific projects of a religious nature.

## 1.2 Regional Disparities

Existing linguistic and denominational disparities were further compounded by regional disparities. Geographical territory and sociodemographic environments largely determine a school's institutional culture, making them key factors in defining the reality of Québec schools.

In many regions of Québec prior to 2000, the Catholic status of public schools located in culturally homogeneous environments with strong francophone Catholic majorities did not seem to cause any problems. This status had assumed an essentially symbolic character and had come to serve as a marker of identity, as something people could identify with, even if adherence to church practices had long been sporadic and religious fervour was waning in many cases. However, major holidays like Christmas and Easter were as effective as ever in bringing people together, and many continued to observe the sacraments, particularly those administered in childhood (baptism, first confession, first communion and confirmation). The social aspect of these practices remained important in the lives of individuals and in society as a whole. Although many intellectuals, journalists, administrators and school staff members decried the existence of denominational Catholic schools, these did seem to retain a symbolic value associated, at the historical and regional levels, with Quebecers' cultural identity.

Rural communities and small and medium-sized cities were barely affected by immigration. While exposure to media sources did eventually make them receptive to cultural and religious diversity, this made very little difference in the daily lives of their inhabitants or in their relationships with others. The defence of individuals' right to freedom of conscience and religion—inspired by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*—seemed, in this instance, to constitute an affront to what was considered the Catholic majority's collective right to its schools, and its teaching and pastoral care and guidance services. In some regions, the word "religion" was automatically taken to mean "Catholic" or, less often, "Protestant." There was as yet no talk of "spiritual development." People were more concerned with certain groups often described as "sects" and seen as eccentric or even dangerous. And Québec as a whole saw a rise in the number of individual spiritual quests carried out at a remove from religious institutions.

For the reasons outlined above, the discrepancy in regional mentalities would not have the same importance for anglophone and francophone Protestants. The Protestant school boards had few students and were scattered over vast areas that often overlapped more than one administrative region. Only the Protestant French schools, whose students came mainly from

evangelical or Pentecostal groups, demanded respect for their denominational rights. These were regional schools<sup>21</sup> with a pronounced religious identity; like the Catholic schools, they owed their identity to the denominational provisions of paragraphs 1 to 4 of section 93 of the Canadian Constitution, which would be amended in 1997 to establish linguistic school boards. These schools were seen as steadfast denominational outposts within a school system at somewhat of a remove from the issue of denominational schools.

Then there was the cosmopolitan region of Montréal, whose pluralistic Catholic majority stemmed from the various cultural communities of which it was composed: “old stock” francophones, Irish, Portuguese, Haitians, Italians, etc. The city was also home to a range of different Protestant groups, as well as to Jews, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and so on. Moreover, a sizeable part of the population claimed it had no religious affiliation.<sup>22</sup> Religious diversity was reflected in the communities’ daily activities. This was a social fact, in Montréal more than elsewhere. Meanwhile, school communities gradually became familiar with the concept of “reasonable accommodation”<sup>23</sup> in religious matters. Remember that this concept was developed in response to the specific needs of certain students, particularly to facilitate the search for innovative alternatives that would take into account the needs of students with physical disabilities. The concept was merely broadened to provide a more adapted response to specific requests in the area of religion.

Because the most militant advocates of secular schools tend to be found in Montréal, some people have erroneously taken this to mean that schools are being secularized to “solve Montréal’s problems.”

Thus the range of ways of thinking about religion also depends on regional discrepancies that still exist.

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21. The students can come from different localities.

22. Data from the 1991 census show that, out of the 3.9% of Québec residents with no religious affiliation, 119 095 lived on the Island of Montréal, 47 760 lived in the surrounding suburbs, and 96 225 lived elsewhere in Québec. These statistics are from *Religion in Secular Schools: A New Perspective for Québec*, op. cit. Note that the percentage of those with no religious affiliation was 1.3 % in 1971 and 2.0 % in 1981. The abovementioned work provides a detailed analysis of this breakdown.

23. It was in the mid-80s that the concept of reasonable accommodation gradually came into its own, as an extension of the application of the charters, specifically in the area of equality in the exercise of rights.

### 1.3 The Gap Between Elementary and Secondary Schools

A final facet of institutional culture is worth examining, in order to obtain a better idea of the ways in which the implementation of the secular school system is likely to be received. To the denominational and linguistic duality of the school system, influenced by the regional sociocultural context, one can add another aspect: that of the different mentalities and practices of elementary and secondary schools in relation to religion.

This discrepancy is explained by a number of factors, including the students' ages,<sup>24</sup> the difference between having homeroom teachers at the elementary level and subject specialists at the secondary level, the size of the schools and the extent to which they are integrated into the life of their respective communities. But the main factors have been the orientations and organizational frameworks of Catholic pastoral care and guidance and Protestant religious care and guidance, before they were replaced by the spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service (SCGCIS).

The student population was not necessarily aware of the orientations or organizational framework of pastoral care and guidance in Catholic elementary schools, but the fact that it was offered to Catholic students, all of whom were entitled to it,<sup>25</sup> helped to make the schools' denominational character visible. For many years, students in all the schools under the jurisdiction of Catholic school boards were called upon to take part in activities leading up or following children's initiation to the sacraments. Students were subsequently offered "evangelical practice workshops." This was consistent with the Church's pastoral mission with respect to schooling, which advocated the transmission of values and openness to the message and person of Jesus Christ. Concern was focused more on the message than on the students, even though the teaching methods used were to be age-appropriate. Moreover, the service was

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24. The socioreligious reality of elementary school students was mainly the result of a tradition in which the father, mother or grandparents transmitted a religious heritage or philosophy of life to the children in the family, whether for social or spiritual reasons. The socioreligious reality of adolescents, on the other hand, could generally be described in terms of stepping back from the family and gradually acquiring greater intellectual freedom, while remaining under the influence of their peers.

25. The wording of sections 6 and 226 of the *Education Act*, as it existed prior to the shift away from denominational school boards, ran as follows: "Catholics students other than those enrolled in vocational training or adult education services are entitled to student services of pastoral care and guidance." (s. 6); "Every school board shall ensure that schools offer: (1) student services of pastoral care and guidance to Catholic students; (2) student services of religious care and guidance to Protestant students." (s. 226).

partly funded by the Church; pastoral animators<sup>26</sup> were hired by the Church and received their mandate from the local bishop; their duties covered both the school and the parish. In some cases, pastoral animators were recognized by the school team and the parents, and were well looked upon by the community. This model of intervention was shelved when the SCGCIS was implemented; but some people, losing sight of the significant problems formerly encountered in organizing this service at the elementary level,<sup>27</sup> expressed a desire to have it back.

Pastoral care and guidance was a very different matter in secondary schools. Regional in character, these schools were not under the direct influence of the parishes. Although, as in the case of the elementary schools, pastoral animators received their mandate from the bishop, they were also members of the professional staff of their respective school boards. But their actions had to be in line with the school's educational mission, and their activities often took on a spiritual and humanitarian character. In the early 1990s in Montréal, a group of pastoral animators challenged the requirement to obtain their mandate by way of the bishop and considered changing the name of the service. A number of colleagues from other regions were of the same opinion. These developments in pastoral care and guidance at the secondary level played a role in the decision taken by the Ministère de l'Éducation in 2000 to set up a spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service at the elementary and secondary levels.

Protestant religious care and guidance developed quite differently. Set up belatedly in the 1990s, it existed mainly in the elementary schools and involved a limited number of pastoral animators.<sup>28</sup> More specifically, although all students in the Protestant system were entitled to it,<sup>29</sup> it was not offered in all the system's public schools. The service was funded in part by an evangelical Protestant organization called Christian Direction, and in part by the Ministère de l'Éducation, which entrusted the organization with the task of administering the funds allocated for its work. Christian Direction assumed a community-based evangelical and denominational character, particularly among francophones.<sup>30</sup> The English Protestant schools were, for their part, relatively unfamiliar with the religious care and guidance service. Since those involved were not able to devote the time required for a full implementation of the service, it had a minor impact on the school system.

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26. The great majority of the some 1 300 people providing pastoral care and guidance in the Catholic elementary schools were women employed on a part-time basis.

27. On this subject, see: Direction de l'enseignement catholique, Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, *Sondage auprès des personnes chargées de l'animation pastorale au primaire en 1991-1992*. Rapport d'étude (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1993).

28. In 2000, it was estimated that there were 25 people working full time ["full-time equivalency" (FTE)] at this task.

29. See note 25.

30. Most of the Protestant communities were independent of one another and not subject to a central authority.



The introduction of linguistic school boards and the shift away from denominational educational services were what prompted the schools in the English system to provide a nondenominational spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service. Those responsible for this new service have tended to give it a multireligious character by providing spaces conducive to meditation, where individual students can freely practice their religion and where a variety of religious symbols are displayed, in keeping with the religious pluralism that has been a feature of life in many of these schools.

Thus the roles played by Catholic pastoral care and guidance and by Protestant religious care and guidance have marked the institutional culture of Québec's public schools in various ways. This was the context in which the specific provisions of sections 36 and 37 of the *Education Act*<sup>31</sup> were made, and in which the SCGCIS took shape. These new provisions were greeted with surprise in a number of French and English elementary schools, where it was felt that something had been lost. To those in most Catholic secondary schools, however, they seemed more natural, primarily because the pastoral care and guidance activities offered at that level already had a very pronounced community and humanitarian component.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

The foregoing look at various aspects of the diversity of institutional cultures within the denominational school system—denominational and linguistic duality, regional disparities, the cultural divide between elementary and secondary schools—indicate the extent of the system's complexity. It also suggests that the shift to secular and open public schools has made halting progress.

However, a successful shift to a nondenominational school system does not imply a homogenization of the cultures that exist in the schools. Precisely because of their flexibility and openness, secular schools should be able to reflect the diversity of the institutional cultures they exemplify. Thus the Québec model of secular schools will constitute a structuring feature of these cultures, one that will ensure coherence without standardizing practices. Before drawing the broad outlines of this model, however, the Committee would like to look at the sometimes uncertain process of making schools nondenominational.

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31. *Education Act*. "A school shall, in particular, facilitate the spiritual development of students so as to promote self-fulfilment" (s. 36, par. 1); "The educational project of the school must respect the freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents and the school staff" (s. 37, par. 3).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SHIFT TO NONDENOMINATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS: AN UNCERTAIN TRANSITION

From 1995 to 2005, the school system underwent far-reaching changes spearheaded by the decisive action of the government of the day. The abandonment of denominational structures and services upset school culture to an extent far beyond what was expected when the process began. The ultimate aim of this process was to establish a system of open and secular schools. Out of all the steps undertaken toward that end, the main point to keep in mind is that they were intended to abolish the denominational system. An overview of this process of deconfessionalization will enable us to highlight the shifts that occurred in public opinion and within the school system with respect to the place of religion in the schools.

#### 2.1 The First Stages of a Difficult Debate

Most members of the Commission for the Estates General on Education (1995-1996) recommended moving toward nondenominational schools at the preschool, elementary and secondary levels. In doing so, they expressed support for an idea already advocated by the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec, and responded to the oft-repeated expectations of many intellectuals, editorialists and the Mouvement laïque québécois (Quebec secular movement), which was very involved in this debate. Their recommendations created dissension among school staff and antagonized both the Catholic majority and the franco-Protestant minority. Since they were merely recommendations, however, people quickly took sides and the debate heated up, with each group trying to influence the political decisions on the horizon.

Well aware of the political, cultural and historical issues at stake, the government adopted a courageous but unusual three-part strategy for following up the Commission's recommendations. This involved setting up linguistic school boards,<sup>32</sup> forming a task force<sup>33</sup> to "examine the place of religion in schools, to define relevant guidelines and to propose methods

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32. This required amending paragraphs 1 to 4 of section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867. The introduction of linguistic school boards also involved merging 156 school boards into 72 (60 francophone, 9 anglophone and 3 special status, for the Cree, Inuit and Naskapi).

33. The chair of the task force was Jean-Pierre Proulx. See: *Religion in Secular Schools*, 1999.

for their implementation,”<sup>34</sup> and maintaining the denominational structures of the Ministère, the schools’ denominational status, Catholic and Protestant moral and religious educational services, Catholic pastoral and guidance services and Protestant religious and guidance services. The aggregate of these unexpected decisions sent out a paradoxical message with respect to the place of religion in schools, one that would have a decisive influence on the development of people’s ideas on this matter.

In terms of organization, Catholic and Protestant students found themselves in the same schools, along with students of other faiths. The denominational services to which Catholic and Protestant students were entitled had to be offered in all schools, and they had to meet the educational needs of all students. Managing religious diversity became more complicated: for administrators, this financially onerous organizational puzzle was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The whole question of denominational services was reassessed, and tensions developed between those providing such services and other staff. Dissatisfaction was rife and extended to parents, especially Protestant parents, whose children were not receiving the denominational services to which they were entitled. The desire to “get religion out of the schools as quickly as possible” became widespread, although many did not have a clear idea of what this meant or what changes in institutional culture it would entail.

## **2.2 Radically Opposite Views**

In the spring of 1999, the Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools tabled its report, *Religion in Secular Schools: A New Perspective for Québec*. As the title suggests, the task force members recommended making the schools nondenominational while recognizing their secular character in a manner consistent with the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and religion.

The report was widely covered by the media, sparking intense feelings in the community and polarizing reactions that were, at times, vehement. At one end of the spectrum were the proponents of the “French republican” approach who, in the name of equal treatment, advocated taking religion out of the schools, whether this meant revoking their denominational status, or eliminating denominational services or the religious expression of staff and students. At the other end were advocates of the “communitarian” approach, who wanted, as much as possible, the same rights to be attributed to all the religions in the schools, in accordance with

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34. Page 95 of abridged report.

parents' right to "choose the kind of education they deemed appropriate for their children."<sup>35</sup> The question of Québec's identity was frequently brought up: some felt that the rights of the Catholic majority were in danger of being flouted and that Québec's religious heritage was being thrown aside//abandoned to make way for minority rights.

In the wake of the hearings held by the National Assembly's Education Commission in the fall of 1999,<sup>36</sup> the government made its decision concerning "the place of religion in the schools." The arguments supporting this decision included the right of parents to choose the kind of moral or religious education they deemed appropriate for their children, the need to pass on Québec's religious and cultural heritage, the need to distinguish between the services offered at the elementary and secondary levels, the importance of respecting the fundamental rights granted under the Charters, and the urgent need to adapt the school system to the sociocultural reality of contemporary Québec society. School staff, parents, representatives of religious and secular groups, journalists and the population in general expressed widely divergent views on these and other related subjects. This array of opposing viewpoints would inevitably lead to change.

### **2.3 Half-Hearted Decisions**

Government authorities found themselves facing difficult choices with respect to systemic issues that had largely escaped the attention of society as a whole. In the spring of 2000, the Minister of Education made his educational orientations known<sup>37</sup> and Bill 118, "modifying various legislative provisions with respect to confessional matters in education," was adopted. Although the Minister then embarked on a far-reaching review of denominational schooling, the maintenance of confessional teaching would ensure that a fundamental ambiguity persisted with respect to the place of religion in the schools.

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35. Micheline Milot, "La transformation des rapports entre l'État et l'Église au Québec: Origines et incidences des nouveaux rapports de force dans la gestion de l'éducation," *Éducation et francophonie*, XXIX, 2 (2001): 9-11. Online at <[www.acelf.ca/c/revue/index.php](http://www.acelf.ca/c/revue/index.php)>.

36. These hearings were among the most extensive in Québec's parliamentary history (256 brief, 30 000 items of correspondence, 60 hours of hearings), a fact that clearly demonstrates the scale of the forces at work, whether for or against the denominational school system.

37. Ministère de l'Éducation, *Québec's Public Schools: Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2000).

Denominational structures were abolished<sup>38</sup> and the schools' public character was affirmed. The schools would subsequently be "common, inclusive, democratic and open."<sup>39</sup> They would be "common" in the sense that they would be required to "accommodate all students within their jurisdiction whose parents wish to avail themselves of this public service." They would be inclusive in that they would take into account "the social, cultural and religious background of their students as well as their talents and limitations."<sup>40</sup> This implied the need to adapt to the diversity of the school population. The term "democratic," meanwhile, referred to the civic values that the schools were meant to impart. Finally, the orientations specified that the schools had to be "open," that is, give students "access to the world of knowledge and a broad-based culture" and be "responsive to the community" they serve. These four characteristics referred to a set of values that the schools were meant to embody: access, equality, democracy and openness. However, this definition of the school's characteristics did not relegate religion to life outside its walls, since schools were obligated to respect students' religious options. Thus Bill 118 carved out a space for religion in the schools, but left local authorities the latitude they needed to take the specifics of their communities into account.

Pastoral care and guidance as well as religious care and guidance were replaced by a nondenominational spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service offered to all elementary and secondary school students. This new service had to be implemented quickly—in September 2001 at the elementary level and September 2002 at the secondary level. Very little time—undoubtedly too little—was set aside to define the service, to ensure that those delivering it and school administrators understood it fully, and to see that it was properly organized in all the school boards.

Sections 36 and 37 of the *Education Act* were amended to give schools the responsibility to "facilitate the spiritual development of students so as to promote self-fulfilment," in accordance with the educational project of the schools, which were required to "respect the freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents and the school staff." These provisions went largely unnoticed because attention was focused elsewhere. For often opposite reasons, most people were more concerned with what was "going out the doors" of the schools than what was "coming in." In what was a defeat for some and a victory for others, the emphasis fell on the admittedly historical dismantling of the denominational school system. The situation could be

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38. These were the confessional committees of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, the positions of the assistant deputy ministers for religious education, and the schools' denominational status. In recent years, for administrative and other reasons, school boards have been eliminating the positions of regional representative and Christian education consultant.

39. *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools*, 23.

40. *Québec's Public Schools: Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations*, 7

compared to that of someone removing an old jacket, unaware that the whole outfit has to change. But the schools would never be the same again, since the general thrust of the law laid the groundwork for the open and secular schools toward which we were heading. Still, this model was neither explicitly named nor openly promoted.

Indeed, neither the documents produced by the Ministère nor the Minister's public statements made any reference to open and secular schools [*laïcité ouverte*]. In its orientation document, the Minister stated that he wanted to provide "a practical response to the expectations of Quebecers with respect to moral and religious education, without specifying the theoretical basis for such a response."<sup>41</sup> This silence is undoubtedly explained by the polarization of the debates surrounding this legislative process.<sup>42</sup> Thus the government orientations and Bill 118 did not so much seek to reconcile divergent viewpoints as to "make practical adjustments that should meet with the approval of the majority and enable the school system to develop in the best interests of the population as a whole."<sup>43</sup>

Still, as these new measures were introduced, the notwithstanding clauses of the Canadian and Québec charters of rights were extended for a period of five years in order to keep Catholic religious and moral instruction, Protestant moral and religious education, and moral education as options. But the time allocated to these subjects was cut in half.<sup>44</sup> Without any particular support (this was not new) or validation in the *Basic school regulation*, these forms of instruction could only deteriorate as time went on. Five years of tension and uncertainty would eventually lead to the collapse of the system, but not before the rickety arrangement began to have disastrous consequences for moral and religious education teachers. Around this time, the idea that "it will all be over in five years time" began to circulate, meaning: there would be no more recourse to the notwithstanding clause, denominational religious education would disappear, and religion would be eliminated from the school system once and for all.

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41. Ibid., 1.

42. Micheline Milot, "La transformation des rapports entre l'État et l'Église au Québec," 9-11.

43. *Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations*, 3.

44. A common ethics and religious culture program for Secondary IV students was planned, however, for 2002. The application of this program, allotted a mere 50 hours, was put off year after year, until other decisions were taken in 2005.

## 2.4 Modest Progress in a Turbulent Time

These are the circumstances that led to the creation of the Comité sur les affaires religieuses in December 2000.<sup>45</sup> The Committee's mandate is to inform the Minister on any matters pertaining to the place of religion in schools, to monitor Québec's socioreligious evolution and to give its opinion on the orientations the school system should adopt in this area. The responsibilities it exercises with respect to the approval of the confessional or religious aspects of education programs are such that the Committee partially replaces the former confessional committees. Moreover, its mandate makes it a successor to the Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools, the Minister of Education having deemed it necessary to maintain an advisory body on such questions, a body that would, if necessary, function as an intermediary between religious groups and the Ministère.

A well-thought-out institutional culture with respect to secular schools and the position of religion and spiritual development in them has been slow to emerge—and with good reason! These changes are taking place in a period of great upheaval in the world of education. In addition to the recent amalgamations and the establishment of linguistic school boards, with all that these involve in the way of administrative, pedagogical and cultural adaptation, stakeholders have been caught up in a whirlwind of change with respect to the sharing of power and responsibilities among the Ministère de l'Éducation, school boards and the schools (Bill 180). The adoption of the Ministère's orientations<sup>46</sup> has also required them to assimilate far-reaching reforms in education, reforms pertaining, among other things, to programs of study<sup>47</sup> and—somewhat later—to the new reference framework for complementary educational services<sup>48</sup> (of which the SCGCIS is a part).

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45. The *Education Act* set up the Committee (s. 477.18.1. and 477.18.2.) and stipulated its mission and functions (s. 477.18.3.) as well as how it would function (s. 477.19. to 477.26.).

46. Ministère de l'Éducation, *Québec Schools on Course: Educational Policy Statement* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1997).

47. Ministère de l'Éducation, *Québec Education Program: Preschool Education, Elementary Education* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2001); Ministère de l'Éducation, *Québec Education Program for Secondary Cycle One* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2004).

48. Ministère de l'Éducation, Direction de l'adaptation scolaire et des services complémentaires, *Les services éducatifs complémentaires: essentiels à la réussite* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002).

Stakeholders had only brief orientation documents at their disposal<sup>49</sup> to help them recognize the cultural issues associated with the disappearance of most of the confessional provisions and to interpret the meaning of the new legislative provisions that had been established. How was one to understand the educational and social objectives driving the secularization of Québec's public schools? What would this involve? Few people knew.

In March 2003, the Committee produced its first brief, entitled *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools: The Educational Challenges of Diversity*.<sup>50</sup> This set out the model of secularity for Québec schools, namely, a secularity that is open to religion and that locates the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms within frameworks consistent with the mission of public schools. The Committee showed that there are challenges which can be met only through proper training for school staff.

Given that the concept of secularity was still unclear, the Committee considered that it had a responsibility to defuse the conflict surrounding the issue. It therefore devoted a third of its brief to the concepts of State neutrality and secularity, viewing the latter as a democratic framework for living together as well as the public school model conveyed by recent changes to the law. After describing the socioreligious landscape of Québec, it located the place of religious expression in the schools within the limits of the latter's educational mission and provided guideposts that could help local stakeholders make decisions in this area. The Committee recommended, in short, that religious diversity in the schools be taken into consideration in such a way as to exclude exclusion, so to speak, while at the same time, warning against letting religious considerations and issues take over the schools. By doing so, the brief echoed the position expressed by the Commission des droits de la personne et de la jeunesse<sup>51</sup> and by the Ministère de l'Éducation in its document *A School for the Future: Policy Statement on Educational Integration and Intercultural Education*.<sup>52</sup> Both of these favoured reasonable accommodation with respect to religious expression in the schools. A brief by the Conseil des relations interculturelles in March 2004 was in complete agreement with this view<sup>53</sup>.

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49. *Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations*. 2000.

50. *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools: The Educational Challenge of Diversity*, 2003.

51. Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, *Les symboles et rites religieux dans les institutions publiques*, (Montréal: 1999); also see the Commission's *Religious Pluralism in Québec: A Social and Ethical Challenge*, (Montréal: 1995).

52. Ministère de l'Éducation, *A School for the Future: Policy Statement on Educational Integration and Intercultural Education* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1998).

53. Conseil des relations interculturelles, *Laïcité et diversité religieuse : L'approche québécoise*, Brief presented to Minister of Citizen Relations and Immigration, Montréal, 2004.



While favourably received by many people who were interested in these questions and concerned about Québec's sociocultural evolution, the brief was poorly understood by the school teams, a fact owing, for the most part, to the abovementioned climate of upheaval. However, debates and disputes between individuals and teaching institutions with respect to the right to freedom of conscience and religion should provide an opportunity to discover how relevant these discussions are. Indeed, the debates that followed the Supreme Court of Canada's decision on the wearing of the kirpan in public schools (March 2006) betrayed a growing sense of unease around this issue.

## **2.5 The End of the Process**

Finally, in May 2005, the Québec government announced that it would no longer resort to the notwithstanding clauses of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and that it would, accordingly, remove Catholic and Protestant moral and religious education from the school curriculum. It plans to adopt, starting in 2008, a single ethics and religious culture program for all elementary and secondary school students.<sup>54</sup> By doing so, it will ensure that the fundamental rights to freedom of conscience and religion and to equal treatment will be respected. Moreover, a single, common education will foster the cultural development of students and contribute to social cohesion by helping new members of Québec society to integrate.

Bill 95, which reflects this government intention, was adopted in June 2005. However, to allow for the development of the new program and the related teacher training, implementation is set for September 2008. Consequently, the right to make use of the notwithstanding clauses and the Charters has been renewed one final time, for a limited period of three years.

This time around, people truly have the impression that "the schools are getting rid of religion." Moreover, this is what is making headlines. The media are sending out this message without necessarily pointing out that what is being eliminated is not religion as such, but rights, structures and services that were reserved specifically for Catholic and Protestant segments of the population. Some people have embraced the idea that abandoning confessional schooling is tantamount to removing religion from the schools, pure and simple. This is what is firing the popular imagination. The symbolic value and practical consequences of this perception are

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54. Elementary school students will have 216 hours of class time in this subject, while secondary school students will have 250 hours.

proving to be all the more significant in that they are in line with the modern mentality which most often sees religion as a private matter.

## **2.6 Decisions in Tune with Contemporary Culture**

To some, the deconfessionalization of the school system seemed inevitable within the cultural context of modern Québec. While this complex question deserves to be more fully examined, the Committee will limit itself here to highlighting certain aspects associated with school culture.

Schools are rooted in a soil that shapes them, a culture that colours them, and a humanity whose overflowing diversity forces them to grow. Québec schools today are developing within the context of modernity.

There are many manifestations of modernity. Considered from the perspective of its basic anthropological traits, it is “the affirmation of the human subject, the emergence of its personal conscience, autonomy, the primacy of the individual over institutions, critical study and questioning, having choices and control over one’s life, as well as initiative and responsibility.”<sup>55</sup>

Too often derided as a form of egoism, individualism is nonetheless a tremendous driving force that makes it possible to grow inwardly and to achieve personal fulfillment in full possession of that freedom to which everyone aspires. This explains, among other things, the importance attributed to individual rights, particularly those associated with freedom of conscience and religion and with equal treatment for one and all.

In Québec, particularly since the implementation of the education reform, these social traits are to be seen in a thorough rethinking of the approach to education, the full effects of which still have to be gauged. Abandoning a model built mainly around the transmission of knowledge, one that implicitly considered the student to be a “receiver,” the new pedagogical approaches see each student as a unique, autonomous individual, an “actor” actively involved in and responsible for his or her own learning. The teacher’s role is thus to guide students on the path to learning and help them develop their competencies. Schools work on behalf of students, which requires them to have an overall sense of the welfare, not only of each individual, but of the entire student body. The challenge of setting up a secular school open to religion and spiritual life is in keeping

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55. André Charron, “Un profil, des convictions,” in G. Lapointe and J.-M. Yambayamba K. eds., *Vers une foi sans institution?* (Paris: Fides, 1999). [Free translation]

with respect for each individual's particularities as a member of a community whose cohesiveness and common good must be maintained.

Modernity also comes with an array of pitfalls: scientism, technocracy, an economic liberalism that creates exclusion, environmental degradation, fragile human relationships (tensions between men and women, authority called into question, intergenerational conflict, etc.). In this context, reference points become increasingly blurred and individuals, like institutions, attempt to redefine what it is that makes them cohesive.

These characteristics of modernity make it possible to understand that public schools are still trying to determine their role should they serve the marketplace, or provide the most comprehensive basic education possible and see to it that all students succeed? Should they play the game of competition and performance, or try to respond to the needs of all students, beginning with the most vulnerable?

As for religion and spirituality, complex realities that are often difficult to deal with, how should public schools handle them? This is a difficult question, first because, in a modern culture that tends to separate the two, one must determine what is specific to each and clarify the relationships that unite them.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, a democratic society where freedom of conscience is defended in charters fosters pluralism and a greater diversity of viewpoints on questions of religion and spirituality.

The right to freedom of conscience leads both individuals and organizations to question the interpretation of all matters pertaining to religion and spirituality. This area is characterized by a certain amount of ambiguity associated with contemporary society, where individuals are often left to make their own decisions and provide foundations for their lives. This situation is advantageous in that it gives individuals unlimited options in their exploration of spiritual life. It also reveals more clearly how important it is to devise means of dialogue, to enable people with different world-views to live as members of a community.

Thus it is easy to understand that the new role of secular schools with respect to the place of religion and spirituality is neither easy nor self-evident. Few people in the education system have a clear idea of it. The task of defining and mapping out this role lies ahead.

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56. The Committee will examine this issue in a document that will soon be published.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This survey provides an overview of the sociocultural context in which the place of religion in the schools has been redefined within the past ten years. Successive governments, wishing to respect changes in attitudes and the entire range of viewpoints expressed, have proceeded one step at a time, both courageously and cautiously. While they have not spoken of an open form of secularity, they have provided markers along the way, in accordance with both the letter and the spirit of the *Education Act*.

In recent years, schools have gone through a period of intense change, one characterized by extensive upheavals, questions and adaptations. In the transformations from 1998 to 2004 (assisted early retirement, the shift to linguistic school boards, reform at the elementary level), school board staff changed rapidly, with more women and young people joining the ranks, particularly as school administrators.<sup>57</sup> Although these individuals were recruited from within the school system, the mobility of a number of those involved in changing the system made it more difficult to arrive at a common vision and ensure continuity. The risk of ad hoc solutions, of becoming sidetracked, of opposition to change was palpable. Old habits were mixed with new practices. Institutional culture was still trying to determine the place to be attributed to religion and spiritual development in the schools.

Should we be surprised then that, in the schools as well as among the population as a whole, a number of people have opted for simplistic and deceptive short cuts? Many have come to feel that religion has been excluded from the schools and that the Catholic majority has been encouraged to keep quiet about its beliefs. The idea of the students' "spiritual development" remains vague and indeed suspect, and the concept of secularity, as applied to schools, is often misunderstood and poorly framed. We must now work to create a new institutional culture so that government decisions redefining the place of religion in the schools can become a reality.

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57. See Renaud Martel, with Raymond Ouellette and Jean-Claude Bousquet, "Qu'est-ce qui a changé chez le personnel des commissions scolaires depuis 1998?," *Le Point en administration scolaire*, (8, 2, 2005-2006): 12-13.

## CHAPTER 3

### SECULAR SCHOOLS IN QUÉBEC: A SINGLE MODEL THAT NEEDS TO BE UNDERSTOOD AND ASSIMILATED

An observation needs to be made at this point: the task of reframing the place of religion and, as a corollary, the students' spiritual development in the public secular school system is a work in progress. What can we do to keep moving forward? The culture of educational institutions could be made clearer in this respect, provided that people better understand what is implied by the secular character of public schools, and that they fully embrace this change while taking into account the reality of the schools.

#### 3.1 Toward a Better Understanding of a Secular and Open Public School System in Québec

The internal consistency of the provisions of the *Education Act* that pertain to the new model of secular and open public schools<sup>58</sup> is more significant than they might initially appear; for, if a new institutional culture is to be meaningful and take root, this must come about through an understanding of the aforementioned provisions. The secular and open quality of Québec public schools is composed of five closely related elements: (1) respect for freedom of conscience and religion; (2) the neutrality of public schools; (3) concern for the spiritual development of students; (4) the common spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service; (5) a single ethics and religious culture program. Taken together, these five elements help create a formative and flexible secular framework for Québec's public schools.

##### 3.1.1 Respect for Freedom of Conscience and Religion

Section 37 of the *Education Act* states that “the educational project of the school must respect the freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents and the school staff.” This provision reminds the education community of its obligation to respect, through the orientations and practices of public schools, the systems of belief to which the students, their parents and the school staff adhere, be they religious or not, and to do this in an equitable manner.

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58. The Committee already outlined various views on this issue in a previous brief, where it presented a number of approaches conducive to the management of religious diversity in a secular context. See *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools*, 2003.

## **An Individual Right**

Freedom of conscience and religion concerns the individual who, unlike the school, is not required to be neutral in matters of religion. Some people, more fervent or involved than others, consider it important—indeed compulsory—to display their religious affiliation by wearing symbolic clothes or objects, or by practising specific rituals. Others, meanwhile, do not subscribe to any religion and prefer to keep their beliefs a private matter. According to the Charters of rights and freedoms, both groups are entitled to express their views within the Québec secular school system. Those who opt to display their convictions must, however, do so in a way that respects the secular character of public schools and the views of others. No person can impose his or her beliefs, opinions or specific practices on any other, much less on the school as a whole; nor can anyone expect the school to meet all of his or her demands.

People are asking themselves, “Could this consideration of the place of religion in schools lead to ‘reconfessionalization’ in disguise? Can, or should, religious expression be allowed in schools? After having removed the Catholic and Protestant religions from the schools, are we not now opening the doors to a free market of beliefs ranging from the most liberal trends to fundamentalist movements? If that is the case, why not open the schools to movements more in keeping with the latest fad or sect?” These fears, which are legitimate, illustrate a lack of understanding of the relationship between respect for individual rights and the secular character of schools.

## **An Educational Responsibility Consistent With the Values of Québec Society**

Where Québec schools are concerned, section 37 of the *Education Act*, which stipulates that “the educational project of the school must respect the freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents and the school staff,” supports fundamental individual rights (protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms) that define a society governed by the rule of law. This section of the Act is one way of affirming that respect for freedom of conscience and religion is both a value essential to society and an educational responsibility of a public school system that is common, inclusive, open and democratic.

The Québec Education Program<sup>59</sup> also reflects a concern for basing a school's educational project on the founding values of society. The QEP calls upon the schools to foster in students an attitude of openness to the world and respect for diversity. It refers to the values of commitment, cooperation, solidarity, equality and encourages students to help develop a culture of peace. In a general way, the Québec Education Program invites schools, in the context of a pluralist society, to promote the values underpinning democracy and prepare young people to act as responsible citizens.<sup>60</sup>

The same points are reiterated in the main documents that have dealt with the schools' mission over the past 10 years. For example, the Task Force on Curriculum Reform entrusted schools with the mission to transmit the values deemed essential for a democratic society. In a document entitled *Reaffirming the Mission of Our Schools*,<sup>61</sup> it drew attention first of all to the values underlying the ideal of democracy: recognition of others, solidarity and responsibility. Emphasizing the need to reconcile individual liberty with social cohesion, it also outlined the requirements for social justice, respect for others and equality, and established conditions governing participation in democratic society, such as non-violence and the free flow of information. Most of the values described in this document had already appeared in the report of the Task Force on Elementary and Secondary School Learning Profiles. This report pointed out, moreover, the importance of relating teaching to the exploration of values in the school. More precisely, it said that "the values emphasized in the classroom and in the school must favour the development of the attitudes needed for life in society. Before they can be taught, democracy, rights, freedom, equality, justice and equity be experience in the school, i.e. in the relationships that exist between the members of this small community."<sup>62</sup>

The application of the concept of reasonable accommodation to the secular sphere also stems from the fact that the public school system exists within a society that is based on the rule of law and founded on democratic values: Accommodation is required when standards that are apparently neutral have a discriminatory effect on people of a specific religious affiliation. Such standards may have to do with the observance of religious holidays or dietary rules, the wearing of distinctive religious signs, etc. Accommodation is aimed at reconciling the exercise of a common right, such as the right to education, with respect for freedom of conscience and religion. However, it must be reasonable; in other words, it must not result in undue

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59. Ministère de l'Éducation, *Québec Education Program for Preschool and Elementary Education* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2001).

60. *Ibid.*, 35-40; Ministère de l'Éducation, *Québec Schools on Course: Educational Policy Statement* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1997), 9.

61. Ministère de l'Éducation, Task Force on Curriculum Reform, *Reaffirming the Mission of Our Schools: A New Direction for Success* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1997), 33-34.

62. Task Force on Elementary and Secondary School Learning Profiles, *Preparing Our Youth for the 21st Century: Report* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1994).

constraints, disadvantages or excessive costs for the organization concerned. Reasonable accommodation corresponds, therefore, to measures that make it possible to treat all people equally regardless of their moral or religious preferences.<sup>63</sup>

The principle of reasonable accommodation has an undisputed educational impact in a democracy, since it requires that those living in it negotiate, and be open and flexible in resolving conflicts and concluding agreements. By applying this principle it, decision makers in public institutions develop the skills needed to reconcile respect for individual differences with the pursuit of the common good. Through it, individuals come to understand that no right is absolute and that life in society requires compromises compatible with the mission, functions and resources of public institutions. Thus this kind of negotiation, which makes it possible to deal with requests on a case-by-case basis, enables both institutions and individuals to learn valuable lessons.

We should point out that there are many instances of reasonable accommodation that we do not hear about, because those involved have been able to work out mutually satisfying grounds for negotiation. Sensationalist media reports on negotiated accommodation erroneously imply that collective rights have been flouted to make way for those of individuals in minority groups. This impression is an obstacle to the inclusiveness that reasonable accommodation is meant to bring about.

### **A Responsibility Framed in Policy**

Since students are protected by the Charters in expressing their preferences and convictions in matters of religion and spirituality, some people fear that specific groups, religious or otherwise, may try to take advantage of these individual rights in an attempt to exert undue influence on public schools. Could some groups exploit the openness that Québec schools show with respect to religion and spirituality to get students to subscribe to their dogma, beliefs or world-views? To answer these questions, we will have to first look at the relevant frameworks provided by the *Education Act*.

The *Education Act* defines many relationships between teaching establishments and the population as a whole.<sup>64</sup> In its analysis of the school situation, the governing board must take

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63. *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools: The Educational Challenges of Diversity. Abridged Version*, 2003, 19.

64. See the *Education Act*, s. 74, 83, 109, 110.3.1, 177.1 and 209.1, par. 1. Keep in mind that two places on the governing board are kept open for representatives of the community. These are not, however, entitled to vote.



into account the “characteristics” and “expectations” of the community it serves.<sup>65</sup> The Act further stipulates that, “based on the analysis and the strategic plan of the school board, the governing board shall adopt, oversee the implementation of and periodically evaluate the school's educational project.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the board must report on the level of quality of the school's services and inform not only the parents but also “the community served by the school.”<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, the school's openness to the community is sufficiently defined to limit any influences that might compromise public schools' neutrality in religious matters.<sup>68</sup> To start with, one cannot establish a public school for the purposes of a specific project of a religious nature. Nor can the enrichment of the provincial education policy,<sup>69</sup> provided for under section 37 of the *Education Act*, refer to the promotion of specific religious or spiritual options, since the same article also stipulates that “[t]he educational project of the school must respect the freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents and the school staff.” Add to this the teacher's obligation to “take the appropriate means to foster respect for human rights in his students,”<sup>70</sup> and his right, subject to the provisions of this Act, to “govern the conduct of each group of students entrusted to his care.”<sup>71</sup>

In both its orientations and its practices, therefore, the secular public school system respects the opinions and beliefs of those it serves. Moreover, it is not the instrument of any religious or spiritual organization. It is precisely in order to respect the basic rights of each individual that it has adopted a position of neutrality with respect to such organizations. This requires it to strike a balance that it is not always easy to find: a line must be drawn between the rights of individuals and competing interests. This challenge should encourage education stakeholders to look for innovative solutions to the management of religious diversity.

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65. Section 71 of the Act stipulates that the members of the governing board must act not only in the interest of the school, students, parents and staff, but also on behalf “of the community.”

66. *Education Act*, s. 74.

67. *Education Act*, s. 83.

68. *Education Act*, s. 240.

69. “The aims and objectives of the project objectives shall be designed to ensure that the provincial educational policy defined by law, the basic school regulation and the programs of studies established by the Minister are implemented, adapted and enriched.”

70. *Education Act*, s. 22, par. 3.

71. *Education Act*, s. 19. See also s. 22, par. 7.

### 3.1.2 The Neutrality of Public Schools

The *Education Act* says nothing about the neutrality of schools in religious matters—schools simply became neutral following the removal of all provisions pertaining to the rights of Catholics and Protestants from the Act. In accordance with these changes, public schools no longer identify with any religion and, starting in 2008, will no longer offer confessional instruction. In such matters, they are adopting the neutral stance espoused by the State with which they are connected:

This neutrality does not mean, however, that the State wants to keep religion out of the schools altogether. The concept of neutrality refers rather to the fact that, in carrying out its mission as protector of the common good, the State must not discriminate in favour of or against a specific religion (or religion in general) in the schools or in society as a whole.<sup>72</sup>

The neutrality of public schools is manifested in different ways, which include requirements with respect to the professional ethics of school staff and the way in which schools deal with the expression of religious diversity. Since the Committee has already pronounced on the latter point,<sup>73</sup> it will limit itself here to illustrating its position by means of two types of religious expression: the presence of religious symbols and the holding of religious or nonconfessional activities. However, it will first look at the question of professional ethics.

#### The Professional Ethics of School Staff

School staff, who now receive their mandates from a State that is neutral in matters of religion, are called upon to show discernment and prudence in expressing their personal opinions. They have a duty to strike, in their professional code of ethics,<sup>74</sup> a new balance between their educational responsibilities and their spiritual allegiances.<sup>75</sup> Because of their position of authority over their students and their educational responsibilities with regard to them, school staff must ensure that they do not unduly influence students in their beliefs, and must not ally

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72. *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools*, 13.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-69. This document also deals with the dissemination of information about religion, classroom use and the school calendar, among other things.

74. Specified in the form of 12 professional competencies outlined in: Ministère de l'Éducation. *Teacher Training – Orientations – Professional Competencies* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2001), pp. 55 and 145. The requirement of professional rigour is expressed as follows: “To demonstrate ethical and responsible professional behaviour in the performance of his or her duties.” (Competency 12).

75. School staff, like students, inherit a specific world-view. See the *Québec Education Program for Preschool and Elementary Education*, 2001, 38.

themselves with any one religion or philosophy. This means that each and every teacher must refrain from promoting his or her preferences in spiritual or religious matters, and avoid making such preferences the focus of teaching. The issue here is, again, respect for the students' freedom of conscience and religion, their right to be exempt from all forms of religious discrimination or from any direct or indirect pressure to conform in the area of religion.

Complying with the principles of professional ethics, school staff also help develop attitudes of respect and tolerance by themselves adopting attitudes that overcome prejudices and show openness to world-views and ways of acting different from their own. Required to maintain a critical distance from their own views, school staff are also encouraged to foster the development of critical judgment in young people.<sup>76</sup> Competency in this area will facilitate a better understanding of human relationships and social cohesiveness. Teachers are therefore called upon, in all of their professional duties, to help “transform the classroom into a cultural base open to a range of different viewpoints within a common space.”<sup>77</sup>

As in all other educational contexts, school staff must demonstrate a concern for fairness and consistency not only in what they say but also in their attitudes and behaviour with respect to people of all religious and philosophical allegiances, so that they foster students' openness to diversity and their respect for individual freedom of conscience and religion. Since these are often delicate and sensitive matters, school staff are strictly required to treat religious or spiritual questions in the same way as the other realities they have to deal with, namely, in a competent, discerning, rigorous and impartial manner. In this way, they maintain an educational position in keeping with the school's mission.

This, then, is the extent of the new ethical challenge facing school staff in a context of open and secular schools. The code of professional ethics, focused on discernment, openness, fairness and respect, is also reflected in the way in which the presence of religious symbols in the school is handled.

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76. The *Québec Education Program* considers this aptitude an essential cross-curricular competency that students must acquire in elementary and secondary school. See the *Québec Education Program for Preschool and Elementary Education*, 2001, 20-21; the *Québec Education Program for Secondary Cycle One*, 40-41.

77. *Teacher Training – Orientations – Professional Competencies*, 61.

## Religious Symbols in the Schools

With respect to the presence of religious signs and symbols in the schools, certain distinctions need to be made. Indeed, the meaning that these signs and symbols may have for students, and the ways in which they may influence students, depend on a number of factors, such as whether they are hung in a classroom or worn, or whether they constitute an integral part of a building's structure.

In the simplest cases, those of religious symbols that are part of a school's architecture or are recognized as works of art, we merely need to keep in mind that these are part of Québec's cultural heritage and, by virtue of this fact, it would not seem fitting to consider removing them.

With regard to religious signs or symbols on display in public schools, one of the problems consists in defining and creating conditions conducive to respect for students' right to freedom of conscience and religion<sup>78</sup> while adhering to the principle of the neutrality of public schools:

Various types of factors must be taken into account at this point: the age of the students; whether or not they constitute a captive audience; the attitude of the school staff (are they in favour of religion, or neutral with respect to it?); whether a symbol is a permanent feature of the school, and whether it is exclusive or inclusive; the institution's aim with respect to teaching or preaching; the cultural or strictly religious scope of the symbol.<sup>79</sup>

Let us keep in mind, first of all, that a room that has been set aside for reflection or prayer and that contains symbols belonging to several religious traditions is conducive to openness with respect to diversity, students' freedom of conscience and the school's neutrality. Displaying religious symbols from one or more traditions for a limited period within the context of pedagogical activities is also consistent with these principles.

On the other hand, displaying one or more symbols from a single religious tradition may prove to be problematic. In the opinion of the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, while displaying a religious symbol in a public place would not infringe the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and religion,<sup>80</sup> it would convey a preference with respect to a particular religious denomination and would therefore be inconsistent with the principle of the school's neutrality.

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78. José Woehrling, *La place de la religion à l'école* (Montréal: Comité sur les affaires religieuses, 2002), 61.

79. *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools*, 63.

80. Pierre Bosset, *Pratiques et symboles religieux: quelles sont les responsabilités des institutions?* (Montréal: Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, 1999), 13 and 20.

Does this mean that all religious symbols displayed in an exclusive manner must be removed from the schools? A number of principles must be considered at this point. They include respect for the rights and freedoms outlined in the Charters, the contribution to the school's educational mission, respect for the socioreligious reality of the community, the school's independence from religious groups, and local decisions representing a consensus.<sup>81</sup> Thus it is not a matter of running roughshod over a community, but of respecting the sensibility of each stakeholder through a collective search for arrangements inspired, to an increasing degree, by respect for the principles of the public schools' neutrality and the right to freedom of conscience and religion.

Religious signs worn by students do not, on the other hand, create any constraints for their peers. The school should, in such cases, respect each student's right to expression in the name of fair and equitable treatment and facilitate all possible accommodations permitted by the constraints of the environment in question. In the cases of religious signs worn by school staff, two principles must be considered: the right of the individual, as a private person, to exercise his or her freedom of conscience and religion, and the fact that this same individual represents a public institution whose neutrality must be promoted.<sup>82</sup> The attitude that professional ethics should inspire in a staff member who wishes to express his or her religious affiliation has been covered above.

Dealing with various religious symbols always calls for judgment that respects each person's rights. In the context of secular schools, the school staff's role is to instruct and educate students so that they can understand and have respect for the meaning that specific religious symbols have for those who use them. This role differs from that of representative of religious denominations, who typically encourage individuals to adhere to a set of doctrines or to become involved in faith-oriented activities.

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81. These principles are outlined in *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools*, 53-59.

82. Woehrling, *La place de la religion à l'école publique*, 87.

## Religious or Nonconfessional Activities

A distinction must be made between religious and nonconfessional activities in the school, i.e. between activities initiated by the students and those originating with the school staff. Activities stemming from student initiatives are legitimated by the students' right to express their religious convictions—with the proviso, however, that these activities are consistent with the school's mission. The school must ensure, furthermore, that the conditions under which such activities are carried out do not impinge on the other students' rights to freedom of conscience and religion.

In the secular school system, activities initiated by school staff must have a specifically educational intention and be consistent with the orientations of the Québec Education Program. Once again, they must not be such as to indoctrinate or discriminate, nor must they impinge on the students' freedom of conscience and religion.<sup>83</sup> As long as school staff respect these conditions, they may, in specific circumstances, organize interdenominational or, in exceptional circumstances, denominational activities in the school.<sup>84</sup> Obviously, students must be free to abstain from taking part such activities, to ensure that they are not subjected to any pressure in religious matters.<sup>85</sup>

The discernment to be exercised in such matters requires that specifically religious activities be distinguished from practices that have acquired a more cultural character over the years—Christmas traditions constitute one such example. It is one thing to familiarize people with key aspects of the traditional culture of Québec society, and another to advocate that they take part in faith-oriented activities.

Many nonconfessional activities can also be organized in the school. These might include, for example, activities focusing on mourning offered in various settings to elementary and secondary school students, or philosophy workshops designed for young people, to encourage them to be open to dialogue and receptive to views different from their own. Activities such as these help students gain a better understanding of their own world-views and to come into contact with those of others. Still other activities enable students to explore new rituals that

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83. Ibid., 87ff.

84. We have in mind conditions similar to those governing the work of AVSEC. See Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, *Developing the Inner Life and Changing the World: The Spiritual Care and Guidance and Community Involvement Service – A Complementary Educational Service. Ministerial Framework* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2005), 27.

85. *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools*, 65.

enable a wide variety of quests for meaning to be expressed in a manner consistent with the freedom of conscience and religion of all participants.<sup>86</sup>

Students may, therefore, be offered many activities, providing they are approached from an educational perspective and are intended to foster a better understanding of human nature and the phenomenon of religion and are carried out in a way that respects the neutrality of the school and each person's freedom of conscience and religion.

### **3.1.3 Taking the Students' Spiritual Development into Account**

Another element shaping the model of open and secular public schools is the inclusion of section 36 in the *Education Act*, which deals with the school's responsibility with respect to the spiritual development of its students. The Committee has observed that this responsibility gives rise to many questions. The Committee is aware moreover, of the resistance this has met with, and is cognizant of the fears expressed by a certain number of people with regard to the school's responsibility and the educational practices that stem from it.

Some observers are of the opinion that spiritual development was made into a legal matter without there being any real debate on the issue, and are worried about the legal repercussions that this may entail. Others, meanwhile, claim to be witnessing a sort of takeover, a cleverly disguised form of "reconfessionnalization." They fear that the students' moral and spiritual integrity may be affected, and wonder if school staff are truly capable of respecting the principle of "freedom of conscience and religion" that is supposed to characterize the school's educational project, as stipulated in section 37 of the *Education Act*. Others fear that a sort of free market of beliefs is sowing confusion in children's minds, or that the spiritual is being reduced to the lowest common denominator, something that would deprive it of its capacity to sustain inner growth.

For others still, facilitating spiritual development in the school environment does not appear to be very relevant in a context characterized by performance, specialized knowledge, productivity and competition. This tendency draws strength from the perception that the school's mission has more to do with professional competency than with the overall development of the students.

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86. One such example was a non-religious ceremony held in a secondary school following the suicide of a student. This meeting, which took place in a classroom, enabled the students to reflect on the memory of their friend. See Isabelle Légaré, "La délicate annonce du suicide d'un étudiant. À l'école secondaire Chavigny, un comité de postintervention ne laisse rien au hasard," *Le Nouvelliste* (Feb. 11, 2006): 44.

While many of the objections raised are often legitimate, the Committee considers that the great majority of those working in the field of education are capable of recognizing the validity of the school's responsibility with regard to the students' spiritual development, as long as it is consistent with the school's mission. Indeed, the affirmation of this responsibility is an expression of something that has always been dear to school staff, since it touches on what has often been called "values education" and does so in a way commensurate with respect for each person's freedom of thought and action. Attributing importance to values in education is something of a Québec tradition: truth be told, it is part of school culture here.<sup>87</sup> The addition to section 36 conveys this concern somewhat differently, by associating it with a global humanist approach adapted to the new context of secular schools open to their community and the world. This responsibility is the concern of the entire educational community, which is why the *Education Act* refers to it in the very article that defines the school's nature and mission.

The Committee considers that facilitating the spiritual development of students means working to develop their "humanity," that which gives them their dignity and value, "because human beings always retain the dizzying power to be inhuman, to destroy that which makes them human, both within others and within themselves."<sup>88</sup> All indications are that we are not born human, but become human. Humanity is a work in progress and not a mere fact, is a set of values to be promoted, acquired and developed, values rooted in the dignity of the person, as recognized in the Charters and disclosed in the great religious and secular philosophies of this world. The dignity referred to here is "acknowledged in others and in ourselves, rather than [being] an object of formal study, since human dignity is based on who we are and not on our usefulness, accomplishments, skills, riches or talents."<sup>89</sup>

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87. Losing the possibility of educating young people in the values that our society holds dear was, moreover, one of the fears that emerged during the process of deconfessionalization, since the transmission of values was often associated with moral and religious education.

88. Olivier Reboul, *Les valeurs de l'éducation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), 90.

89. Comité sur les affaires religieuses, *A New Approach to Religious Education in School: A Choice Regarding Today's Challenges. Brief to the Minister of Education* (Québec: Ministère de l'Éducation, 2004), 11-12.



This view of matters is fully compatible with the school's institutional neutrality and the respect for freedom of conscience and religion guaranteed in the Charters. We are not concerned here with promoting a specific vision of humans; rather, our goal is to encourage individual growth in humanity by respecting each person's beliefs and process of development.

School staff may draw on a variety of secular or religious sources of human wisdom to facilitate students' spiritual development from an educational perspective. This may also be accomplished through exposure to works of visual art, music and literature, which are also great sources of insight into human nature and guides to the invisible, the ineffable and the pure gratuity of being. Aside from the benefits that these resources bring, school staff would do well to consider their contribution to students' overall education and make more frequent use of them in their teaching.

The task of "facilitating the spiritual development of students," of working to make them more fully human, can contain pitfalls. For this reason, school staff must ensure that such initiatives do not take a confessional turn, which would be incompatible with the school's secular character, even in cases where a particular religion exerts a predominant influence on the school population. On the other hand, secular currents of thought rooted in modern rationalism may emerge and lead to actions based on philosophies that are frankly at odds with any consideration of the students' religious identity, or modelled more on New Age ideas. Such ways of thinking may also foster a conception of education centred on the profitability of the knowledge acquired, on the principle that the school has more and better things to do than to concern itself with spiritual questions.

To indulge in such tendencies would be to risk depriving students of an appropriate education consistent with the model of Québec's open and secular public schools, which the amendments to sections 36 and 37 of the *Education Act* refer to by stipulating that they must "facilitate the spiritual development of students" in the context of an educational project that "respects the freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents and the school staff."

This comprehensive humanist approach favoured by the Committee with regard to students' spiritual development is also reflected in the aims of the Québec Education Program, which are: construction of identity, construction of world-view and empowerment. These aims, which form the basis of the entire curriculum, stem from the view that students are young selves in the process of construction. Hence the importance of having schools focus their mission on

behaviour and humanization, “not only [to] ensure that as many students as possible succeed in school itself, but also [to] prepare all young people to live successful lives.”<sup>90</sup>

### **3.1.4 The Spiritual Care and Guidance and Community Involvement Service**

The Committee considers the new spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service as another building block in the creation of an open and secular public school system in Québec because this service reconciles institutional neutrality with respect for basic rights in matters of religion and equitable treatment.

On the one hand, this complementary educational service is defined as nonconfessional; that is, it “is not intended to carry out the specific mission of the Churches or religious groups, or to serve their interests; regardless of their religious beliefs, those who provide this service will not act on behalf of Churches or religious groups. They are not entitled to promote either the perspective or the rituals of any Church or religious group.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, schools who offer this service comply with their educational mission, and do not thereby become the instrument of any religious or secular organization whatsoever. The orientations of this service, as well as the guidelines it provides for animators, are consistent with the principle of the school’s neutrality. In this respect, the service embodies the separation of Church and State.

On the other hand, this service is offered indiscriminately to all students, whether or not they belong to a religion or religious group. All receive the same treatment and have access to this service. Therefore, SCGCIS animators must respect, and have the students respect, each other’s right to freedom of conscience and religion, while “refusing to impose any specific ways of acting, thinking or living on them with respect to spiritual life or community involvement, and by allowing them to express their own convictions, while showing respect for those of others.”<sup>92</sup>

The goal of SCGCIS is to help students become spiritually autonomous and responsible citizens by doing their part to build a harmonious and supportive society. The SCGCIS gives students opportunities to question themselves, to become more aware of concrete issues, to get involved in the lives of their communities and to reflect on their experiences. It serves, therefore, as a locus for the development of meaning and solidarity, a place for discovery and creativity where action and reflection take priority.<sup>93</sup>

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90. *Québec Education Program for Secondary Cycle One*, 4.

91. *Developing the Inner Life and Changing the World*, 10.

92. *Developing the Inner Life and Changing the World*, 20.

93. This paragraph is based on *Developing the Inner Life and Changing the World*, 9-13.

As a complementary educational service, the SCGCIS furthers, in its own way, the aims of all complementary services,<sup>94</sup> namely, to help students progress in their learning and be successful in school. They are designed to meet the students' overall educational needs, and are provided in close collaboration with the adults in their environment.

As we already mentioned, the SCGCIS is one of the elements shaping the model of open and secular Québec public schools. This service and the future Ethics and Religious Culture Program may be considered the pedagogical bases of the new institutional culture to be established with respect to the treatment of religion and spiritual development in public schools.

The Committee has noted, however, that the SCGCIS has not received the attention it requires to perform its role effectively. As stated in Chapter 2 of this document, the SCGCIS was created in confusion and haste, in the very midst of an incomplete and ambiguous process of deconfessionalization. These circumstances have done nothing, of course, to foster an understanding of the nature and scope of the service. Since its inception, the SCGCIS has had to compete with numerous other measures and orientations dictated by the reform that originated with the Estates General on Education. Thus it has been difficult to keep attention focused on the service, especially since it seems at times to be tainted by the confessionalism that some people wanted to be rid of at all costs.

Finally, implementing the SCGCIS in all of the elementary and secondary schools seems to have presented school administrators with some difficult challenges, such as that of fully funding the service, whereas religious authorities previously shared the costs of pastoral and religious animation. There is also the matter of assigning or hiring elementary school staff—Catholic pastoral animators and Protestant religious animators were formerly hired by their respective churches. Also, SCGCIS staff at the elementary level face higher certification requirements (university training), while the profession is still in the process of being defined at the secondary level.<sup>95</sup> Finally, implementation has involved the conversion of posts and the transfer of

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94. For a detailed discussion of the place of the SCGCIS within the context of other complementary services, see: Ministère de l'Éducation, Direction de l'adaptation scolaire et des services complémentaires, *Complementary Educational Services: Essential to Success* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002).

95. On May 15, 1987, the Ministère de l'Éducation and the Fédération des commissions scolaires catholiques du Québec jointly published a job classification plan for professional staff in the school system. See the *Classification Plan for Professional Personnel* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec). On May 15, 2001, a supplement to this plan set out the competency criteria for the position of spiritual life and community involvement animator. The section on professional personnel states that such animators must hold an undergraduate degree in an appropriate specialty that consists mainly of courses in spiritual or religious life as well as social life. *Developing the Inner Life and Changing the World, The Spiritual Care and Guidance and Community Involvement Service: Ministerial Framework* adopts the same competency criteria (see Section 2.2, "Professional Qualifications," 28-29). Since there is no tradition of university education in this field, certain universities offered upgrading courses at the time the service was being implemented. There is, however, an

professionals (pastoral and religious animators) from the secondary school level to the SCGCIS, as well as the organization of upgrading courses, etc.

Let us stress that, at the time the SCGCIS was established, most school administrators were attending to a host of competing priorities and did their best to deal with the various constraints in the school system.<sup>96</sup> These individuals were poorly informed about the nature and scope of the new service, and about the challenges it represented. And they were just as perplexed about a form of school organization that was apparently imposed on all schools, when the trend seemed to be toward greater autonomy.

To date, the operating conditions of the SCGCIS have proven to be highly precarious in most school communities. Staff training, in-school service organization models and job descriptions seem to be presenting problems just about everywhere in Québec. The situation appears to be particularly acute at the elementary school level. At least this is the picture that has emerged from the Committee's review of the literature<sup>97</sup> and from the many voices that have requested adjustments.<sup>98</sup>

Although the Committee understands the fears, reluctance and uneasiness that have plagued certain people in the school system since the implementation of the SCGCIS in 2001, we now consider it necessary to remedy some of the problems observed,<sup>99</sup> as they hamper the conditions needed for the service to carry out its mission and therefore threaten the credibility of the service.

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animators association, which bears the name Association professionnelle des animateurs et animatrices de vie spirituelle et engagement communautaire du Québec (APAVECQ).

96. Examples would include the organization of services for students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning disabilities, the increase in the amount of time devoted to physical education and health, upgrading for teachers as the education reform was being implemented, and the increase in the amount of teaching time at the elementary school level.
97. Aside from the various documents issued by APAVECQ, the Committee has studied the following publication: Comité directeur conjoint MEQ-CS sur les plans stratégiques et la reddition de comptes, *Rapport final (sans la 3<sup>e</sup> partie) du sous-comité sur la mise en œuvre du service d'animation spirituelle et d'engagement communautaire (rapport Bisailon)* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2004).
98. A collective declaration of support for the SCGCIS was brought to the attention of the Minister and the Committee in February 2005. While it pointed out the service's potential, it also highlighted the problems experienced as well as the pressing need for assistance to guarantee the service's survival. The Québec Federation of Parents' Committees even stated that effective implementation of the SCGCIS was essential if parents were to be satisfied with the process of deconfessionalizing the schools. See: Québec Federation of Parents' Committees, *Pour une déconfessionnalisation réussie de l'école. Commentaires de la Fédération des comités de parents du Québec sur le projet de loi n° 95, (mémoire)* (Québec: FPC, 2005), 6.
99. For example, the lack of human and material resources, the poor student/school/ animator ratio, the problems associated with training and information, and the lack of job security.

The Committee has often expressed its concerns in this area,<sup>100</sup> convinced that spiritual life and community involvement animators help young people to grow and become more fully human, in addition to providing professional support that is essential to school staff as they work toward the creation of an institutional culture consistent with the open and secular nature of Québec public schools. The Committee is also of the opinion that schools deprive themselves of a key tool for changing mentalities when they limit the effective action of spiritual life and community involvement animators. For these reasons, the Committee hopes that lasting solutions to these problems can be found.

### 3.1.5 The Ethics and Religious Culture Program

The Ethics and Religious Culture Program, compulsory for all elementary and secondary school students, constitutes the fifth building block in the open and secular model for Québec public schools. When it comes into effect in September 2008, this program will be a component of the general education of all students.

In keeping with the other decisions it has taken in the matter of public schools, the MELS justifies this new program as follows:

The implementation of a common ethics and religious culture program for all students in Québec is rooted in the government's will to best serve the interests of everyone involved (students, parents, school staff and society as a whole). This decision attests to the government's intent to respect contemporary sensitivities with regard to equal treatment of people and groups and not to perpetuate a system of exceptions that contravenes the fundamental rights recognized by the Charters.<sup>101</sup>

This decision is intended to broaden the religious culture of young people, while fostering an understanding of Québec culture as shaped, notably, by the Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Again, according to the MELS, "[the] learnings carried on in the proposed program are based on the following four principles: they are continuous learnings, [they are] rooted in the student's

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100. "With respect to the way the spiritual dimension is dealt with in the schools, the Comité is still deeply concerned about the upgrading of the spiritual care and guidance and community involvement service. It is particularly important that quality service in this area be provided, because of what it is meant to do and because of the novelty of this service in the school setting." [Free translation] Comité sur les affaires religieuses, *Rapport annuel 2003-2004*, (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2004), 14, 6 and 7; *Annual Report 2001-2002*, 6 and 15; *Annual Report, 2002-2003*, 5.

101. Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, *Establishment of an Ethics and Religious Culture Program: Providing Future Direction for All Québec Youth* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2005), 4.

reality and in Québec culture; they respect the freedom of conscience and religion; [they] foster living in harmony with others.”<sup>102</sup>

The presence of this compulsory program of studies in the course schedule stems from a social choice that is now deemed to be necessary. The Committee is delighted that all those concerned have rallied to the cause, particularly since the orientations of this program are largely in keeping with the recommendations the Committee made to the Minister in its brief *A New Approach to Religious Education in School: A Choice Regarding Today's Challenges*.<sup>103</sup>

We must keep in mind that the orientations retained are as much concerned with students' personal development as they are with citizenship education. Young people's educational needs in ethics and religion are indeed considerable, for life in a modern society like Québec is complex and demanding. It requires that “students become free subjects who develop inner strength and who express their convictions through community involvement.”<sup>104</sup> In order to practice enlightened dialogue in this context, students must familiarize themselves with Québec's religious heritage, be open to religious diversity and position themselves, after due consideration, with respect to religions and new religious movements.<sup>105</sup> There is no doubt, in the mind of the Committee, that education in religious culture, as in ethics, can make a significant contribution to the development of the student's personal and social conscience.

While it may seem to some that combining ethical training and religious culture in the same program is a risky compromise in both theory and practice, the need for this two-pronged education, as well as its educational and social importance, no longer leave any room for doubt. It may be opportune, at this point, for the Committee to recall the importance it attributes to both ethics and religious culture:

With a firm belief in the importance of moral education for the student's development, the Committee is of the opinion that the new path should make equal room in the curriculum for religious education and ethical instruction. These two areas of study in fact examine extremely complex social issues and raise questions that are crucial for young people's education. This means that the two subjects must extend throughout elementary and secondary school, since religious education cannot be confined to elementary school as if it were of concern only to young children. The arguments set out in this brief demonstrate that the complexity of religious issues require that they also be covered in secondary school.<sup>106</sup>

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102. Ibid., 5.

103. *A New Approach to Religious Education in School: A Choice Regarding Today's Challenges*, 2004.

104. Ibid., 10.

105. *Establishment of an Ethics and Religious Culture Program: Providing Future Direction for All Québec Youth*, 2005, 8.

106. *A New Approach to Religious Education in School: A Choice Regarding Today's Challenges*, 25-26.

Integrated with the perspectives of the Québec Education Program, the Ethics and Religious Culture Program will be a compulsory element in students' general education. It will contribute significantly to the attainment of the school's three pedagogical aims as it pursues its educational mission.

Thus, in keeping with its objectives of personal development and citizenship education, the Ethics and Religious Culture Program can help shape Québec's open and secular public school system by "enriching the student's general culture, allowing them to open up to others with tolerance and respect, equipping them to act responsibly toward themselves and others, and teaching them to live together in a democratic Québec that is open to the world."<sup>107</sup>

### **3.1.6 Conclusion**

This survey of the five constitutive elements of the open and secular Québec public school system should give some idea of the secular model's richness and scope. The secular approach espoused here is neither hostile nor unreceptive to the phenomena of religion and spirituality, provided they are approached in ways consistent with the school's mission and rules.

Making the components of this secular approach work together will certainly present a challenge to school personnel and the educational community as a whole. By meeting this challenge, they will help strengthen social cohesiveness both inside and outside the schools. Québec's pluralist society can be a place where it is good to live together in a way that respects cultural, religious and ideological differences, all the while sharing common values and participating actively in democratic life. In this regard, public schools must play a determining role in the way they educate young people.

## **3.2 Applying the Open and Secular School Model at the Local Level**

The Committee is of the opinion that the open and secular model will help make public schools an important vehicle in building the Québec of tomorrow. This model conveys a set of values dear to democratic societies: harmony, fairness, openness to others, inclusiveness, tolerance, solidarity, pluralism, etc. School staff need, therefore, to have a thorough understanding of it.

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107. *Establishment of an Ethics and Religious Culture Program: Providing Future Direction for All Québec Youth*, 2005, 12.

Clearly, not all schools are at the same point in implementing this model, which is called for by the changes that have been made to the school system in order to adapt it to the new realities of Québec society. While some have almost fully integrated the principles underlying the Québec secular model, others have so far felt less concerned by government decisions that, since 1988, have gradually abolished the confessional provisions governing schools.

Despite these divergences, the Committee is calling upon each school to apply the model of open and secular schools stemming from the abovementioned changes. There are absolutely no advantages to be had by clinging to the confessional model, even though it may seem more reassuring to some because it is more familiar, and even if it may seem more suited to their perception of social realities. Nor is there anything to be gained from promoting a form of secularism modeled on that of France, which allows little latitude for dealing with religion in schools. Our government decision makers did not adopt this model because, in their view, it did not meet students' educational needs.

Applying the new public school model does not mean, however, ignoring local realities. While fully aware of the substantial changes that some schools are being called upon to make, the Committee would like to point out that these are not intended to create a uniform institutional culture. The new model of open and secular schools must not eliminate the diversity evident in the ways in which different institutional cultures deal with religion and spiritual development. It is, therefore, up to each school to assimilate the building blocks of the open and secular model without renouncing its own realities, and while looking clearly at the steps required for a faithful application of its principles. In this transition, everything depends on an intelligent interpretation of situations,<sup>108</sup> good judgment and cultural sensitivity.

Thus no educational community is being asked to repudiate its cultural roots, nor to cut all ties with religious organizations; it is simply a matter of ensuring that its activities have an educational and cultural character compatible with the nature and mission of secular public schools. This is indeed the way for public schools to preserve their autonomy. Moreover, no secular school operates in a vacuum when it comes to Québec's religious and cultural heritage, regardless of whether the school community is homogenous or diverse. Recognizing the value

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108. The Committee subscribes to Régis Debray's urging toward an "intelligent secularization." See Régis Debray, *L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque, rapport au ministre de l'Éducation nationale* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), 43-44: "Now seems to be the time for a transition from an *incompetent secularism* (the religious as a construction does not concern us) to an *intelligent secularization* (it is our duty to understand it). Particularly in light of the fact that, for a secular person, nothing is taboo or off limits. Wouldn't a calm and methodical study of the phenomenon of religion, one conducted without allegiance to any confessional interest whatsoever, be the touchstone that proves the validity this intellectual asceticism?" [Free translation]



of this religious and cultural heritage is what facilitates the integration of new Quebeckers into Québec society and prevents “old stock” Quebeckers from feeling that they are being stripped of their identity. Those who want to eliminate all religion-related matters from the schools<sup>109</sup> fail to understand that to do so would be to risk creating a major cultural deficit in a society whose culture and very landscape are imbued with religious references, and in a world where religion and civilization are intertwined.

Taking into account a school’s particular situation also means considering the stakeholders’ capacity to adapt. It is not always easy to adapt to change, whether this involves individuals or organizations. When too many orientations and practices change relatively quickly, the institutional culture has trouble adapting; and this is true even when the changes in question are expected or even desired. The usual reflex is to dispense with, or put off until later, whatever seems complicated, tricky or unnecessary. Without always being aware of it, people tend to fall back on old ways, received ideas or external dictates, forgetting who they are and where they come from.

Thus, when it comes to considering the phenomena of religion and spiritual life, the challenge consists in helping the schools to cast a much-needed glance back<sup>110</sup> at their own culture, attitudes and practices, in order to once again grasp these realities from the perspective of the open and secular Québec public school system. This exercise is needed if we are to go beyond the conflicts that certain school communities have experienced during the transition to a secular system.

Moreover, the Committee has noted with satisfaction that many schools have already integrated the basic components of the open and secular Québec public school system. For example, some school boards, operating often at the insistence of their teachers, have availed themselves of the provisions of the *Education Act* to replace confessional instruction by locally developed ethics and religious culture programs in Secondary Cycle One. And some schools have also benefited from the latitude that the Basic school regulation has given them to offer, in

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109. This has resulted, for example, in initiatives being taken by certain school administrators to have crucifixes removed from the classroom, but without taking into consideration the symbolic import of this act and, more especially, without discussing what should be done in conjunction with other school stakeholders. Let us be clear about the Committee’s view of this situation: the problem is not that crucifixes were removed from classrooms, but the way in which this was done. It is not a matter here of closing oneself off to requests consistent with the neutrality of the public school in religious matters.

110. We refer here to the concept of reflectiveness. The Committee expanded on this concept in its brief *A New Approach to Religious Education in School: A Choice Regarding Today’s Challenges*, 2004, 17-18. The concept of metacognition conveys the same idea. See: Eve Krakow, “Metacognition: Helping Students Understand How They Learn,” *Schoolscapes* 5, 5 (June 2005): 4-6.

Secondary V, locally developed religious culture programs that respect the neutrality of the public school and the right to freedom of conscience and religion.<sup>111</sup>

We should also highlight the efforts made by spiritual life and community involvement animators at the elementary and secondary school levels, despite obvious organizational hurdles involved. Drawing on the orientations set out in the ministerial framework for spiritual and community animation, they have developed a wide range of activities designed to facilitate students' spiritual development and to help them learn more about respect for individual freedom of conscience and religion.

Also worth noting are the many actions that numerous schools have taken to reasonably accommodate individual requests regarding respect for freedom of conscience and religion and the right to equality. Guided by a concern for teaching students how to live together harmoniously in a pluralist society, school principals, assisted at times by other members of the school staff, have proven to be endlessly inventive (most of the time in complete anonymity) in responding to this type of situation, to the satisfaction of all the parties involved.

These few examples attest to the emergence of a new institutional culture consistent with the open and secular nature of Québec public schools. They also show that stakeholders at the local level have wholeheartedly adopted the government's orientations with respect to the place religion and spiritual development in public schools.

The Committee would like to remind all those concerned that the culture of a community is not something that can be imposed from above, in accordance with some sort of decree, law or theory. Rather, it develops organically, from the ground up. The authors of real change in this area are the people who create, invent and indeed weave their culture out of their own realities. We must avoid making secularism into a dogma, and abandon the utopian idea of homogeneous mentalities and practices in matters of religion and spiritual development. The cultural diversity of the public schools within (and between) the two linguistic school systems must be recognized as a source of richness.

While the Committee firmly believes in helping school communities become fully aware of their unique characteristics (ways of seeing things, values, customs, practices, etc.), it subscribes equally to the idea that all public schools, wherever they happen to be in Québec, must also

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111. Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses, *L'appréciation de divers programmes d'études sur les religions offerts localement dans des écoles publiques et privées* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2005).

fully assume their secular character. The current change of institutional culture must be nurtured, supported and encouraged, to foster the emergence of a shared vision of open and secular schools. We must exchange ideas at every opportunity and, through reflection, dialogue and shared experience, learn together to create the kind of schools that today's society is calling for.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Given

a certain lack of understanding, uncertainty and resistance observed with respect to the model of open and secular schools promoted in government orientations and provided for in the *Education Act*;

the animated public debate surrounding the reconciliation of State neutrality with respect for individual rights in matters of religious expression;

that a better understanding of what is meant by an open and secular school system can help schools more fully assume their responsibility to educate students to live together in harmony in a pluralist and secular society;

the need to provide schools with support so that they can better integrate the elements of an open and secular school system into their own institutional culture;

### **The Committee recommends that the Minister:**

- highlight, within the government and society as a whole, the extensive impact on society of the government's decisions with respect to the treatment of religion in secular schools;
- explain the key role that the public school system plays in shaping the future of Québec society, in terms of the way it manages religious diversity and contributes to the sharing of common values;
- give the appropriate departments of the MELS, particularly the Direction de la formation et de la titularisation du personnel scolaire, the responsibility of ensuring that sufficient initial and ongoing teacher training is provided to school staff members, especially school administrators, to enable them to fully assimilate the model of open and secular public schools;

- give the appropriate departments of the MELS, as well as its regional offices, the responsibility of developing information tools and public education strategies to help parents understand the government's orientations with regard to the secular nature of public schools.

## CONCLUSION

The issue of the place of religion in the public space of Québec schools is still not fully resolved, despite more than ten years of debate and government decisions with respect to it. Every time someone takes legal action against a school in order to exercise his or her right to religious expression and brings the matter before the courts, the newspapers splash it all over the front page. Actions in support of the right to freedom of conscience and religion in school have generated quite a lot of reaction, much of it negative. This has shown that school staff and indeed the population as a whole are not well informed about, and have a poor understanding of, the Québec model of open and secular public schools.

In light of the current social situation, the Committee, which in 2003 produced a brief<sup>112</sup> on the issue at the request of the Minister, felt it urgent to examine the matter in greater detail. In this latest brief, the Committee wanted to clarify the question of the change in institutional culture called for by the deconfessionalization of the school system, by analyzing the cultural complexity of this system while remaining attentive to changes in ways of thinking throughout the process.

The Committee has observed that the schools have not had an opportunity to seriously reflect on the consequences of the changes affecting the new approach to the place of religion and spiritual development in the now secular public school system.

This is why the Committee deemed it useful to outline the five building blocks that constitute the open and secular framework of the public school, as set out in the government's orientations and the provisions of the *Education Act*. This analysis has led the committee to recommend that local authorities assume responsibility for the corresponding institutional culture, a task that will require objectivity, time and collective effort if we are to arrive at a common vision of Québec's secular school system.

While denominational education was able to draw on particular support systems and means to achieve its purposes, today's educators have not been provided with any specific resources to help them implement this long-awaited secular public education system. The Committee considers it important to arrive at an integrated vision of the components of open and secular

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112. *Religious Rites and Symbols in the Schools: The Educational Challenges of Diversity*, 2003.

schools and to correct current misunderstandings by providing Quebeckers, especially parents, with pertinent information and giving school staff proper training.

The creation of a secular school system is a sociological change of greater import than it may appear. The Committee considers that the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport has a responsibility to guide Quebeckers through this transition, if it does not want public opinion to adopt positions contrary to its educational aims. Deconfessionalizing the school system does not mean taking religion out of the schools, as if it were something superfluous; it means dealing with it differently, as an object of study, a fact of culture and civilization, in the context of a neutral school system that respects basic human rights. As espoused here, open and secular schools represent an educational philosophy, a new ethos of school culture to be promoted and supported.

When it comes to such delicate matters, lack of planning is detrimental to both the schools and society as a whole. To think that an appropriate institutional culture could come about on its own would be tantamount to magical thinking. If they are not provided with a minimum of support and guidance, the public schools will become more vulnerable to all sorts of pressures.

The Committee fervently hopes that its recommendations will be given immediate consideration. Aware of the new requirements that come with every major change in mentality and practice, it wants to provide the schools with guidance to manage the process of institutional change currently under way. This is why it is already working on two new briefs, one on the spiritual development of young people and the ways in which this is dealt with in the schools, and another on the issues associated with the new Ethics and Religious Culture Program in the context of the open and secular Québec public school system.

## ANNENDIX

### MEMBERS OF THE COMITÉ SUR LES AFFAIRES RELIGIEUSES

Jacques Racine Chair	Parent of an elementary-school student Québec City region
Rafat Noor Khan	Parent of an elementary-school student Montréal region
Si Ahcène Si Chaib	Parent of a secondary-school student Montréal region
Marc-Henri Vidal	Parent of secondary-school student Montréal region
Odette Guay	Elementary-school teacher Commission scolaire du Pays-des-Bleuets
Denis J. Roy	Secondary-school teacher Commission scolaire des Phares
Roch Bérubé	Director of educational services Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'Île
Dominique MacConaill	Spiritual care and guidance and community involvement animator Commission scolaire de Laval
Patrice Brodeur	Professor Faculty of theology and religious studies Université de Montréal
Thomas De Koninck	Philosopher Faculty of philosophy Université Laval
Fernand Ouellet	Religious studies and intercultural education specialist Université de Sherbrooke
Roger Boisvert	Coordinator Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport

Lorraine Leduc is in charge of the Comité sur les affaires religieuses.



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For information on this brief, please contact the:  
Comité sur les affaires religieuses  
Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport  
1035, rue De La Chevrotière, 16<sup>e</sup> étage  
Québec (Québec) G1R 5A5

Telephone: 418-643-7070  
Fax: 418 644-7142  
E-mail: <[car@mels.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:car@mels.gouv.qc.ca)>  
Web site: <[www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/affairesreligieuses](http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/affairesreligieuses)>

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