



The English Speaking Catholic Council

Le conseil catholique d'expression anglaise

REPORT
ON THE PROPOSED
ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE PROGRAM

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We affirm the positive objectives of this program, namely:

- 1) To incorporate ethics and religion into public education;
- 2) To foster students' capacity to know and express their moral and religious convictions within a pluralistic context;
- 3) To develop the capacity for meaningful dialogue about diverse moral and religious convictions;
- 4) To anchor this program in the distinctive cultural and religious heritage of Quebec.

However, we recommend some major revisions to the program. Five interrelated areas stand out for us:

1. Age Appropriate Pedagogy (# 2)

The basic pedagogical methodologies for elementary and high school are identical. Does this make sense given what we know about different stages of moral and religious development? The objectives for the elementary program read like objectives for a graduate program in religious studies. We noted that in the list of bibliographical resources there were no references to the academic literature on faith development. There is a need to examine literature on stages of moral and faith development to provide age-appropriate pedagogical approaches to religious and moral instruction. This concern would probably demand serious reconsideration of the elementary program.

2. Development of Religious Identity (# 3)

There is strong social scientific data to show that the connection to a religious affiliation is correlated with positive social and educational outcomes for children. Religious affiliation is also correlated with higher levels of civic participation. Having anchors in a faith tradition can foster a stronger and richer sense of the self. Contemporary values of tolerance, diversity, and openness are important, but without a deeper grounding of the self, students can be left struggling for a sense of identity. A sense of anomie and uprootedness is correlated with

negative outcomes for children. For example, recent research indicates that suicide rates are “significantly” higher among sectors of the population without religious affiliation than among religiously affiliated members (*American Journal of Psychiatry* 161:2303-2308, December 2004). Creating educational programs that weaken or relativize religious affiliational identity may put children at greater risk.

The document on the *Establishment of an Ethics and Religious Culture Program* notes the “ever-growing malaise in new teachers” in dealing with teaching for commitment. The program hopes to ease this malaise by eliminating the need to accompany children in fostering their religious identity. However, this malaise will remain a serious problem. Teachers who feel uncomfortable with religious commitment and who are incapable of creatively fostering existing commitments will be very poorly equipped to meet the challenge of being meaningful “brokers” of religious culture in their classrooms.

Educators must learn to accompany the student in the formation of their identity. Teachers will not be contributing to meaningful personal formation if they treat religion education as a mere exercise in comparative religion that examines religion as an extrinsic cultural heritage rather than an integral dimension of human identity. In a sense teachers must educate with a ‘theological’ sensitivity that treats religious commitments with deep respect and recognizes their significance for inner identity.

Children cannot adapt to the complexity of the world around them without a secure sense of self and connection to a broader history, tradition and community. Meaningful self-integration is a key component to the meaningful engagement with a difference. One of Canada’s authorities on religious education, Elmer Thiessen, speaks about the importance of “teaching for commitment.” The program needs to give greater attention to the role of the school in accompanying students in the formation of their religious identity, especially at the elementary level but also at secondary levels.

3. Defining Core Values and the Common Good (# 4)

Definitions of “common values” and the “common good” are vague and confusing. We suggest that the document define the “common good” in much clearer and more substantive terms such as:

- 1) Fostering a society that recognizes the dignity, rights and freedoms of persons;
- 2) Recognizing the social nature of the human person and promoting social development by collaborating to provide the basic goods required for human fulfillment (food, clothing, health, work, education, culture, family);
- 3) Establishing a political community that ensures democratic participation, collaboration, and dialogue in just, stable, and secure social order.

Furthermore, the document encourages “reflective stance” (32) towards religious cultures, but suggests a more docile acceptance of what are repeatedly called “the basic values of Quebec society.” At no point does it imply the need for ethical vigilance and critical assessment of prevailing “Quebec values.” Cultural values, whether they be “Canadian values” or “American values” or “Quebec values,” should not be presented as some body of elevated norms beyond critical ethical reflection.

4. Recognizing Parents as Central Partners in the Dialogue of Religious Education (# 6)

The treatment of religious rights and freedoms betrays a basic flaw. The project completely screens out the fundamental human rights of parents from religious education. The article on parental rights in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights acknowledges the unique rights of parents to transmit their moral and religious traditions to their children: "Parents," article 41 states, "have a right to give their children a religious and moral education in keeping with their convictions."

The current wording, a 2005 revision of article 41 in the Quebec Charter, considerably weakens the original language of the Charter. The original wording conformed more closely to article 13 of the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which recognizes the right of parents "to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions." Canada is a signatory to this Covenant, therefore the original articulation of this basic human right of parents in religious and moral education should carry some weight.

In the ERC program, the concern for the teacher's freedom and rights overshadows that of the child's parents. The program underscores the critical role of teachers as mediators and guides:

"Their main responsibility is to accompany and guide their students in exploring and understanding numerous forms of religious expression and other cultural expressions or representations of the world and human beings. Teachers therefore play the role of cultural broker or mediators, that is, they build bridges with the past, the present and the future, especially with regard to Quebec culture." (20)

Does this approach imply a role for teachers that displaces the role and rights of parents as critical mediators of faith and culture to their children? Where do parents fit into a program of religious and moral instruction? Does the emphasis on dialogue include the importance of ongoing dialogue between teachers and parents in these critical areas of personal development?

There should be a triangular relationship between students, parents and the school in moral and religious education. The “rights” of parents in the moral religious formation of their children need to be recognized by bringing parents into the dialogical community that the program promotes.

5. Religious Freedom, Confessional Institutions, and Charter Rights (# 16, 18)

The Consultation document states the goal of the ERC program is to “enable Québec students to develop a religious culture consistent with ministerial orientations.” The statement has an odd and disturbing ring to it. It seems to imply that the Ministry of Education plans to use the ERC program to oversee the development of the religious culture of Quebec students. Is it the role of the state to manage the “religious culture” of Quebec? Is it the role of the state, through its control of private and public education, to supervise the development of the religious culture of Quebec?

We are particularly concerned with the question of the imposition of a mandatory program of religious instruction on private confessional schools. The existence of faith-based schools that still have a distinctive confessional character and mission should pose a very particular concern for the implementation of any program of religious instruction. We argue for an asymmetrical approach. The government should not impose this program on faith-based or confessional schools but allow collaboration with these schools to devise programs of instruction connected to their traditions, but consistent with basic objectives of the ERC program. This asymmetrical approach would be more appropriate given the distinctive nature of confessional institutions and consistent with the Charter recognition of a fundamental right to freedom of religion. We are convinced that established confessional schools can assist in the design of programs of moral and religious instruction that fully meet the broad goals of the program in a manner consistent with their mission.

The current program seems to treat the values of tolerance and respect as external add-ons to a religious base. However, this betrays a misreading of the nature of religious traditions and how they have been important players in fostering values of tolerance and respect. The program needs to explore how major faith-based traditions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, etc.) can be important instruments for fostering values of tolerance, respect, dialogue and cooperation. Demonstrating how these core values are anchored in particular faith tradition actually strengthens the commitment to those values. The program alludes to this kind of approach when it suggests exploring how religious figures can be models or mentors of social justice. (p. 11) But religions have also been important vehicles for the promotion of rights, respect, diversity and tolerance. These values can be vigorously supported and promoted within a confessional program of religious instruction.

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