

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,
SALIENT AND COMPLEMENTARY POINTS
JANUARY 2005**

WHAT IS THE COMITÉ SUR LES AFFAIRES RELIGIEUSES (CAR) PROPOSING?

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| ➤ A common educational path | <p>This new path would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be offered to all elementary- and secondary-school students • replace the current system, which offers a choice among moral education (ME), Catholic religious and moral instruction (CRMI) and Protestant moral and religious education (PRME) • attribute as much importance to moral education (also called “ethical” instruction) as to the study of religions, including Christianity (what CAR calls “religious education”). |
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WHAT DOES CAR MEAN BY “RELIGIOUS EDUCATION”?

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| ➤ Religious education according to CAR | <p>This consists in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a new approach to the study of religion and currents of secular thought (which put forth visions of humanity, society and the world) • an introduction to the world of religion that enables students to understand what it is that constitutes religions, beliefs and convictions and how these realities influence people, societies and cultures • an approach based on the human and social sciences |
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WHAT IS THE SITUATION WITH RESPECT TO RECOURSE TO THE NOTWITHSTANDING CLAUSES?

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| ➤ In the opinion of CAR, a common educational path including ethical instruction and a new approach to religious education would respect the charters of rights and freedoms with respect to equal treatment and freedom of conscience and religion. | <p>This common educational path:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • would not entail recourse to the notwithstanding clauses in education legislation • would nonetheless require, for a limited time, a transition period <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - that would give the Ministère de l'Éducation time to develop new programs of study - that would enable elementary- and secondary-school teachers to obtain the necessary training - during which it would be preferable to retain the options of ME, CRMI and PMRE. This would entail recourse to notwithstanding clauses for a limited time. |
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WHY SHOULD THE MINISTÈRE ADOPT THE SOLUTION OF A COMMON EDUCATIONAL PATH INCLUDING A NEW APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

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| <p>➤ Young people need to be informed.</p> | <p>This is essential so that they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • familiarize themselves with the various religions and currents of secular thought and become aware of their influence both on Québec and Western society • develop critical judgment with respect to religions and new religious groups (learn how to analyze them) • come into contact with the rich legacy (works of literature and art, values, social action, etc.) that various religions and philosophies have passed on to us down through the ages • learn how to live with individuals and groups from different cultures and religions and be capable of building a society in which there is room for everyone |
| <p>➤ The social context has changed.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of churches in society has changed. People today draw upon different sources to form their opinions of life and the world. • There are more and more different religions and religious groups in Québec, as well as more and more different ways of determining one's affiliation or position with regard to them. • Charters of rights and freedoms now play a greater role. The media often carry stories of situations and incidents involving freedom of conscience or religion, or the right to equal treatment under the law. |
| <p>➤ There is general agreement that the system of choosing among ME, CRMI and PMRE leads to numerous problems.</p> | <p>The main problems caused by this system are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In practice, the parents' choice of ME, CRMI or PMRE is not always respected. • Children whose choices differ from those of the majority are often isolated. • This system, which divides students according to the option they choose, does not allow them to deal with moral and religious questions together, whereas school is intended to help them develop their ability to interact with one another while respecting each other's differences. • This system causes organizational problems. For example, in some schools ME, CRMI or PMRE have to be entrusted to teachers whose training is in other subjects. • Secondary-school teachers, whose work is often underappreciated or unrecognized, are given too many groups to teach. As a result, they are turning more and more toward other subjects. • Elementary-school teachers encounter problems when they invoke their right to freedom of conscience and refuse to teach religion. |

WHAT MIGHT STUDENTS LEARN THROUGH THE NEW APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

Since program development is the exclusive responsibility of the Ministère, CAR confines itself, in the following pages, to explaining how its key concept of religious education might be translated into subject content and competencies. By doing so, CAR is responding to certain objections to the effect that its concept of religious education is not appropriate for elementary-school students. **CAR emphasizes that the following points merely suggest what students could learn and in no way imply any commitment on the part of the Ministère.**

Moreover, it goes without saying that the suggested learning must be adapted to students' levels of intellectual, psychological et social development.

➤ Elementary-school students could:

- **cover different content**

Examples:

- the religions that have helped shape Québec society, including Christianity and Amerindian spirituality
- major elements of the different religions:
 - main stories and characters
 - holidays and rituals
 - symbols and signs of belonging
 - behaviours and life styles

Students could also see how these elements are also found in the lives of individuals, families and groups.

- **develop competencies that foster coexistence with people of different convictions** (these competencies pertain to the knowledge and recognition of others, to one's stance within the world of convictions, to reflectiveness and civic mindedness in the public affirmation of one's convictions)

Examples:

- identify some of the ways in which people take a stance in relation to religion (people with firm convictions, agnostics, non-believers, those whose participation is limited to major holidays and certain special events, etc.)
- recognize that others are entitled to have their own perspectives on life, death, love, God, etc., and develop attitudes of respect and openness that make it possible to discuss these subjects with people who have different points of view
- identify certain behaviours that are not respectful of people with different opinions, and that consequently are not acceptable in society
- learning ways of doing things that show respect for people belonging to other cultures and religions

➤ **Secondary-school students could:**

• **cover different content**

Examples:

- world religions including Christianity, the Amerindian religions, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as currents of secular thought
- the diversity and struggles inherent in these religions and philosophies
- the answers that these religions and philosophies provide to humanity's great questions about the meaning of life, death, illness and suffering, etc.
- the complexity of the concept of "truth" from subjective, social, religious and scientific perspectives, among others

• **develop competencies that foster coexistence with people of different convictions** (these competencies pertain to the knowledge and recognition of others, to one's stance within the world of convictions, to reflectiveness and civic mindedness in the public affirmation of one's convictions)

Examples:

- seek and recognize the complexity behind the apparent uniformity of all religions or secular philosophies
- observe the internal consistency of all religions through the multiplicity of features such as their history, beliefs, rituals, symbols, organization, obligations, prohibitions, etc.
- recognize that convictions, be they religious or not, or one's own or someone else's, grow out of a person's education, human environment and culture, and that this is why it is normal to take note of widely varying opinions
- see that beliefs and values (whether religious or not) influence their vision of the world and society, as well as their ways of relating to others and becoming involved in society
- develop the ability to put themselves in other people's shoes and to see things from their perspective
- understand that it is legitimate for others to have points of view and behaviours different from their own when it comes to religion, even when they do not agree with these points of view and behaviour
- distinguish between behaviours that do not respect the principle of life in society (the rights of others, public order and safety, etc.) and those that simply do not fit with their own convictions
- learn ways of taking a stand and affirming their own convictions without causing others to feel manipulated, attacked or having their identity threatened

HOW IS THIS APPROACH PREFERABLE TO THE CURRENT SITUATION?

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| <p>➤ A common educational path would make it possible to group together students of all religious and philosophical persuasions to deal with topics pertaining to religion.</p> | <p>This way of doing things would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • foster the development of the students' ability to interact with others in ways that respect their differences • avoid producing the kind of isolation currently experienced by students who choose the minority option from among ME, CRMI and PMRE • give all students access to same basic education in the areas of ethics and religion |
| <p>➤ A common educational path including ethical instruction and a new approach to religious education could help students learn how to live in society with individuals and groups representing different cultures and religions.</p> | <p>This type of learning would be based on three essential educational principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inclusiveness CAR suggests approaches to content (e.g.: dialogue and case studies) that would make it possible to include all students in the class's learning activities. To ensure satisfactory relationships, it is important that all of the students in each class know that they have a place in the group, that they belong to a majority or a minority. • respect for differences Respect for others, with all their differences, must be a characteristic feature of the school as a whole. This attitude is particularly important in courses that deal directly with different religions, and CAR emphasizes its importance when it comes to appreciating different points of view and taking a stance. • the concern for a common space By having young people with different backgrounds come together to deal with the subject of religion, the new approach to religious education would provide them with an opportunity to engage in discussion and to take part in common projects with other students who have very different experiences and points of view. These young people would thereby learn how to build a common space in a pluralist society. |
| <p>This new approach would also have the advantage of clarifying the school's role with respect to religion (this responsibility differs from those of the family and religious institutions or groups, whose role it is to bolster the young person's sense of belonging to a specific tradition)</p> | <p>Within the framework of its mission to provide instruction and to socialize, the school must educate people on this subject so that they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a better knowledge of religions and a better understanding of what motivates people to subscribe to them, or not • are able to respect and work and live with people having points of view different from their own • acquire the knowledge required to make enlightened judgments about the behaviours of people professing religious beliefs • can understand certain current events, works of art and cultural phenomena in which religion plays an important role |

WILL TEACHERS BE EQUIPPED TO PROVIDE THIS TYPE OF EDUCATION?¹

- **Future elementary- and secondary-school teachers should be prepared to work within the framework of the new approach to religious education.**
- **Elementary- and secondary-level teachers who are already working will also need professional development.**

Examples of necessary competencies and qualities:

- intellectual rigour and mastery of both the learning content and the competencies to be developed in the students
- impartiality and respect for students who take divergent positions with respect to the ideas promoted by various religions and philosophies
- the capacity to present topics and to lead discussions on themes that elicit widely varying opinions
- the ability to have students express their views in ways that are acceptable to those who think differently

WHY MAKE THIS CHANGE NOW?

- **A majority of the population want schools to provide instruction covering the major religions.**

- A study conducted in 2004 by the Centre for Information and Research on Canada reveals people's preferences with respect to the teaching of religion in schools:

| | Québec | Canada |
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| Should teach about all major religions | 52 % | 56 % |
| Should teach only Christian religion | 19 % | 11 % |
| Should not teach any religion at all | 28 % | 31 % |

- Two qualitative studies conducted in Québec² have shown that the majority of parents, teachers, school administrators and religious leaders would prefer a type of instruction that has all students come together to study the major religions over the current system of options.
- A massive quantitative study conducted in 1998³ showed that, despite parents' attachment to confessional teaching, a very large majority of Quebecers (between 84 % and 97 %, according to the groups surveyed) was in favour of a type of teaching that would enable children to learn about the various religions in society and teach them tolerance toward people of different religious affiliations.

1. The comments on page 4 pertaining to the Ministère's responsibility and autonomy obviously hold with respect to teacher training.

2. Micheline Milot and Fernand Ouellet, *L'enseignement de la religion à l'école après la loi 118. Enquête auprès des parents, des enseignants et des directeurs d'établissement*, Immigration et Métropoles, January 2004.
 Micheline Milot and Fernand Ouellet, *L'enseignement de la religion à l'école après la loi 118. Enquête auprès des leaders religieux*, Immigration et Métropoles, January 2004.

- **The decision (made in 2000) to deconfessionalize the school system while maintaining the system of options throughout elementary school and in Secondary Cycle One has not prevented the area of instruction in religion and morality from becoming more vulnerable**
- The following are just two of the numerous problems associated with the application of the system of options:
 - Many teachers have dropped these subjects and future teachers are choosing them less often, in the belief that a career teaching them is no longer possible.
 - These subjects are often entrusted to teachers trained in other subjects, which results in a drop in the quality of instruction and reinforces the perception that a number of these subjects no longer have any place in the schools.
 - CAR fears for the future of these subjects, unless the current system of options is replaced by a new common educational path.
- **CAR's proposals are in line with the basic orientations of the education reform with respect to the aims of education.**
- The new approach to religious education would contribute to students' education by helping them to:
- **construct their identity**
By facilitating contact with people from different religions and currents of secular thought, religious education as advocated by CAR will help students become aware of their many affiliations and affirm their convictions while showing respect for others. The Québec Education Program (QEP) stresses that enabling students to express their opinions and make responsible choices helps them to develop their autonomy. CAR is in complete agreement with this educational aim when it advocates learning through deliberation.
 - **construct their world-view**
CAR's proposals would help students construct their world-view by putting them in contact with a broad range of cultural resources. The kind of religious education that CAR is promoting would give young people an opportunity to, among other things, perceive the complexity of religions and their role in society, and to reflect on questions pertaining to life, death and suffering. It would be in line with the Québec Education Program, which states that "students can enrich their world-view by looking critically at themselves and their actions, opinions and values."
 - **become empowered**
The QEP states that "knowing what action to take in response to the complexity of current issues or how to confront major ethical and existential questions gives young people power over their lives." CAR's approach to religious education will foster the attainment of this objective by helping young people to act as responsible citizens in publicly affirming their beliefs and values, and to cooperate with people who have different convictions.

3. Micheline Milot and Jean-Pierre Proulx, *Les attentes sociales à l'égard de la religion à l'école publique. Rapport de recherche* (Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, 1999, Appendix 2.3, 28-29).