

COMITÉ SUR LES AFFAIRES RELIGIEUSES

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS
TODAY'S CHALLENGES, TOMORROW'S CHOICE**

**Brief to the Minister of Education
Abridged Version**

March 2004

A new perspective on the teaching of religion and ethics in the schools

Changes made to the school system between 1997 and 2000 have led to the emergence of a new model of a secular school that is open to religion and spirituality and that constitutes a more suitable response to a social context marked by the complexity and diversity of religion within society. The Comité sur les affaires religieuses (hereinafter "the Committee") has observed, however, that attempts to redefine the place of religious education in the schools have not affected the basic orientations surrounding this issue in either elementary or secondary school;¹ indeed, these endeavours have made the position of religious education in the curriculum more precarious than ever. This situation calls for a review of the type of education that is devoted to religion in the schools and a reconsideration of how it is organized.

The Comité sur les affaires religieuses proposes that the current system of choosing among moral education, Catholic religious and moral instruction and Protestant moral and religious education be replaced by a common educational path for all students that includes ethical training and a new way of teaching religious education

The common educational path would:

- be in line with the new secular school model
- apply throughout elementary and secondary school
- devote equal importance to religious education and ethical training in elementary and secondary school
- respect the autonomy of each of the above

This latter principle should lead to separate programs for education about religion and ethical training at the secondary level, an arrangement that would enable students to acquire the knowledge and competencies specific to each subject. However, since ethics and religion are usually taught by the same teacher at the elementary school level, it seems more practical, at that level, to teach them as two separate modules integrated within the same program.

The Committee would like for its proposal to release the government from the obligation to have recurrent recourse to notwithstanding clauses.

¹ These decisions have maintained the current system of choosing among moral education, Catholic religious and moral instruction and Protestant moral and religious education in elementary school and during Secondary Cycle One. The present arrangement inscribes the study of religious issues strictly within confessional frameworks and discriminates among students on the basis of their secular or religious belief systems.

The context

Young people have various educational needs with respect to religion. More specifically, they need to:

- better understand Christianity and the other traditions, the ways in which they are manifested in society and their contributions to culture
- **prepare themselves for community life and the acceptance of various belief systems this implies**
- develop their critical judgment with respect to convictions
- have access to the knowledge found in various religions and in trends of secular thought

Especially since religion continues to affirm itself in society as:

- a mobilizing force
- a marker of identity
- the bearer of a significant spiritual, cultural and social legacy

Ethical training and religion from spiritual, cultural and social perspectives: an original and promising alternative

The new program devoted to religion and ethics would be different from both:

- **denominational instruction**
aimed at reinforcing a student's sense of belonging to a specific belief system by channelling their understanding through that system
- **the teaching of religion exclusively from a cultural and historical viewpoint**

Starting from the observation that religion is not only a cultural and historical artefact but also an integral part of many people's life experience, identity and relationships with others, this **new program will pursue two inseparable aims:**

- **Personal development**
Together with the other subjects and the broad areas of learning, the new religion and ethics program would target the student's empowerment in addition to his/her construction of an identity and a world-view.
- **Citizenship education**
This program is all the more necessary since adherence to a particular religious group or belief system can be a source of tension in a pluralist society. Moreover, it would offer students ways of understanding what it is that motivates people to become involved in building society. These two aims are sufficient to have this common educational path included in the certification of studies.

To foster the attainment of these educational aims, the new program on religion and ethics...

– proposes certain essential learning that:

- **enables students to take a stance in relation to the universe of beliefs,** which presupposes a clear understanding of their own options
- **promotes knowledge and acknowledgement of others,** thereby enabling others to feel that they are recognized for who they are
- **leads them to reflect on their own beliefs,** thereby enabling them to acquire the tolerance they need to recognize that the convictions of other people are deserving of respect
- **teaches them moderation in the social affirmation of their identity,** which, based on reciprocity, facilitates relationships with people who subscribe to different beliefs (civic awareness)

– favours certain pedagogical orientations which ensure that:

- **studying religions, students take into account their own religious experience** and the concrete forms that religions take in everyday life
- **students accept responsibility for their own learning,** becoming the prime agents of their learning with respect to the complexity of religious phenomena and functioning as seekers in a quest for what it is that makes them truly human
- **students learn to deliberate,** thereby developing the competencies required for participatory democracy in a pluralist society and for dealing with religious issues that are often controversial
- **students strive for intellectual rigour,** which involves a critical study of religious phenomena that takes into account the main achievements of the science of religion

Teacher training is key to the implementation of the new religious education program that the Committee is proposing

Teachers of this new program must ...

- have acquired sufficient initial training
- have access to ongoing professional development at both the elementary and secondary levels

This training must ...

- give teachers a firm grasp of the entire range of subject content, educational aims and learning specific to religious education
- ensure that they have assimilated the pedagogical approaches adopted for the new program
- make them aware of the attitudes required for this type of teaching

Implementation of the common educational path that the Committee is proposing requires a period of transition in order to avoid both the ambiguity associated with the current situation and undue haste in progressing toward the new

Given the requirements associated with the current situation, the Committee invites the Minister to make his views known publicly in an **orientation paper** that sets out the conditions for the implementation of a common path in ethical and religious education in the Québec school system.

Conclusion

The Committee invites political decision-makers to turn toward the future and venture out on the road to change. As far as the Committee is concerned, the choice is clear. The school has a major role to play in educating people about religion. There are so many social issues at stake in this type of education that the school cannot relinquish its responsibilities in the face of the challenges involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given

- the educational needs of young people with respect to religion
- the importance of taking society's social, cultural and religious evolution into account
- the precarious position of teaching religion in Québec schools
- the requirement to respect the freedom of conscience and religion of all people
- the need to find solutions that will make recourse to notwithstanding clauses unnecessary

The Comité sur les affaires religieuses recommends that the Minister

- publish, as soon as possible, an orientation paper on religious education in the schools, basing himself on this brief and indicating the direction to be taken in the years ahead
- abolish the current system of having to choose among moral education, Catholic religious and moral instruction and Protestant moral and religious education in elementary school and during Secondary Cycle One
- create a new religious education program based on the principles outlined in this brief and distinct from both confessional teaching and the teaching of religion as a cultural phenomenon
- set up a single educational path for all students from the start of elementary school to the end of secondary school, devoting equal importance to religion and ethics
 - in elementary school, these subjects would be taught as separate modules within the same program
 - in secondary school, each subject would constitute a separate program
- include the acquisition of compulsory credits in these subjects in the certification of studies, in keeping with the orientations of the *Policy on the Evaluation of Learning*
- mobilize the human and financial resources required for a smooth transition to the common educational path recommended in this brief and, more particularly, to set aside whatever monies may be required to ensure that teachers currently practising receive the professional development they need to teach these subjects
- ensure that future elementary-school teachers who are generally entrusted with religious and moral education programs receive suitable training in these fields of knowledge and that a good grounding in ethics and religious culture be an integral part of training for all elementary- and secondary-school teachers
- invite the various education departments to offer a single training profile for future secondary-school teachers who wish to provide religious education and instruction in ethics as part of citizenship education

Abridged version of the brief adopted at the twenty-fifth meeting
of the Comité sur les affaires religieuses
February 4 and 5, 2004

Supervision

Christine Cadrin-Pelletier
Secretary for Religious Affairs

Coordination

Lorraine Leduc
Coordinator
Comité sur les affaires religieuses

Research and Writing

Jean-Marc Charron, Chair
Comité sur les affaires religieuses
Roger Boisvert
Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses

Translation

Direction de la production en langue anglaise
Services à la communauté anglophone
Ministère de l'Éducation

Acknowledgements

The Comité sur les affaires religieuses would like to express its gratitude to Micheline Milot, a professor in the sociology department of the Université du Québec à Montréal, for her valuable assistance in developing the concept for the proposed new religious education program.

For more information on this document, please contact:

Comité sur les affaires religieuses (CAR)
Ministère de l'Éducation
1035, rue De La Chevrotière, 16^e étage
Québec (Québec) G1R 5A5

Telephone: (418) 643-7070

Fax: (418) 644-7142

E-mail: car@meq.gouv.qc.ca

Web site: <www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/affairesreligieuses>