

# *A single non-confessional program: Educational choices for each school*

ADVICE FROM THE PROTESTANT COMMITTEE TO THE MINISTER  
OF EDUCATION ON THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN SCHOOLS  
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## INTRODUCTION

The report *Religion in Secular Schools: A New Perspective for Québec* produced by the Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools in Québec outlines a number of events in the field of education in Québec over the past few years which have led to a debate of the place of religion in our schools. The quality of the research and the systematic presentation of historic and contemporary facts in the Task Force's report makes a significant contribution to this continuing debate.

Members of the Protestant Committee support the principle which guided the Task Force in the development of its position: that all citizens are equal and that the State must adopt a neutral position with regard to confessionality so as to show no religious discrimination in the management of public affairs. We also believe, like the Task Force, that individuals and minority groups must be able to protect their basic rights and interests, even if the majority is of a contrary opinion.

We acknowledge that the school system must be attentive to the needs of the people of Québec and bear in mind their development since the Quiet Revolution. The Protestant Committee believes in the importance of encouraging a social cohesion which respects the diversity of the communities which make up Québec's social and cultural landscape. For this reason, it is our belief that the debate on the place of religion in schools is of prime importance in the development of a public culture for Québec society.

Members of the Protestant Committee, however, wish to indicate their concerns as to the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools. The removal of the right of parents to choose an educational project which is religious in nature is unacceptable. We believe that governing boards must retain their autonomy and be allowed to define educational projects without restriction, which includes a religious content if desired.

The Protestant Committee fears that the "cultural" teaching of religion, as defined in the Task Force report, renders religion itself trivial by treating it solely within the purview of social sciences and thus ignores matters related to spirituality and transcendence.

Rather, we believe that a single, non-confessional program of religious education should be developed, which takes account of personal spiritual development, the concept of transcendence, the Québec context, the faith of each individual, personal convictions and the balance between collective and individual rights. Further concrete references within this new program should also include the importance of the family, the search

for meaning and for truth, the significance of work, a sense of responsibility, respect for others and an openness toward other cultures.

## THE LOSS OF PARENTAL POWER

Members of the Protestant Committee believe that despite the important work done by the Task Force, the report is primarily based on one logic, that of the courts. Consequently, the choice of a model based on "republican neutrality" as the organizing force of relations between religion and public education makes dialogue on the issue all the more difficult since the juridical aspect eclipses certain basic questions, such as the meaning of democracy, secularization and the place of religion within the common public space of Québec society.

The Committee, however, acknowledges the significant importance of those legal questions which are a matter for the courts. On the other hand, it fears that the concern for equality among persons of all beliefs excludes the notion of fairness for the parents who have always contributed to the vitality of the present system of education. In our view, this would be equivalent to searching for equality at the price of equity. We believe that common sense must prevail over legalism if we are to continue to build an open and welcoming society for all Quebecers. Since many new immigrants come from traditional societies where religion is part of public life, religion in school will not appear unusual to them. Indeed they would consider it important to understand the religious heritage which has shaped the values of modern-day Québec.

Nevertheless, like the authors of the Task Force report, we feel that no solution which would merely enforce the status quo is ideal for the entire school system, especially for the everyday reality of Québec public schools. A pluralistic solution must be promoted which will satisfy the needs and desires of the school community. The Québec school system should begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century by diversifying its approaches to respect the decentralization of powers to public schools through the governing boards.

It seems evident to us, that if schools are to succeed, they must strengthen their links with the community in order to better integrate competencies and to exercise their mission which is to instruct, to socialize and to qualify. It is with this in mind that under the present reform, governing boards have replaced orientation committees. Taking into account the wishes of parents and various workers within the community is vital to school success and to the commitment of the school community to its milieu, since it is the community which provides the main access to globalization and the knowledge-based society.

For this reason, rather than suspend the rights of Catholic and Protestant parents in school matters and to avoid infringing various charters of rights,

as suggested in the Task Force report, the Protestant Committee favors a more innovative approach: not setting aside the expectations of a majority, but rather making more space for the religious diversity which constitutes the ethnocultural landscape of modern Québec. Here, pluralism and democracy go hand in hand.

Thus, it is up to the governing boards, and not the State, to define educational projects, with no legal restrictions as to religious content. At the centre of these concerns must be the wishes of parents. In other words, guiding the educational values of their children's schooling is a parental responsibility. But, at the same time, parents delegate a major part of this task to the school, which in turn falls under the responsibility of the State. Also included in this school community are the institutions of civil society, such as unions and professional groups, as well as groups of parents - all of these take part in the mission of the school and the educational project defined by the governing board.

## THE RISK OF TRIVIALIZING RELIGION

The school's commitment toward the community and young people's spiritual development gives full meaning to the matter of the place of religion in schools. It is our belief that values, beliefs, customs and all aspects of culture in general are intimately linked to religion in a society, to the spirituality of individuals and to the concept of transcendence. As a result, the Protestant Committee considers it difficult to conceive of a solely "cultural" teaching of religion, within the meaning given to it by the Task Force, since it does not meet the spiritual needs of children.

Spirituality, by definition, is a commitment toward beliefs and values. If teaching ignores the existential questions related to religion, while at the same time setting up a comparative structure, as suggested by the Task Force report, it would trivialize the various religious traditions and the Judeo-Christian heritage which exist in Québec society. Moreover, parents from certain religious groups will systematically refuse their children being exposed to so relativistic a view of religion.

An approach to teaching religion, based on secular humanism, as proposed by the Task Force, sets aside two essential aspects of religion: spirituality and transcendence. Too often, the pleasure of discovery and learning is sacrificed on the altar of the objectives of a program and a formal assessment of knowledge. The teaching of facts alone does not involve the students in a process of reflection centred around the transformation of the person and the maturation of thought. In order to stimulate the imagination and spirit of students a search for meaning must be at the heart of any program on religion. If we want to have a meaningful impact on the education of the young, the larger story of the search for the meaning of humanity must interact with the smaller story of the life of each student.

Given this perspective, we consider that the best solution is a single, non-confessional program of religious education. If implemented, it should include:

- a presentation of the Judeo-Christian religious heritage and its meaning in modern Québec society;
- a presentation of the world's principal religions and of the modern world's ideologies and visions, without comparing them;
- profound consideration of personal spiritual development and of the concept of transcendence in relation with all the fundamental values proper to the family, the search for meaning and for truth, the significance of work, a sense of responsibility, respect for others and an openness toward other cultures.

Moreover, enough time must be allotted to religious education to ensure the program's credibility. Provision must also be made for a flexible structure and for financial resources necessary for initial teacher training and professional development in religious education, in order to ensure the quality of teaching the competencies particular to this program.

## RELIGIOUS ANIMATION AND THE CONFESSIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE MINISTÈRE DE L'ÉDUCATION

The recommendation of the Task Force report regarding one common religious and spiritual animation service for all students strikes us as a valid solution in the face of the duplication which could result from having a Protestant animation and a Catholic pastoral service in the same school. Access to animation services by students of all religions present at the school corresponds to the already-existing philosophy of the Protestant religious animation service. The general objectives of this new service could thus be taken from what the Protestant Committee drew up several years ago. Financing for this service must be provided solely by the *ministère de l'Éducation*.

As to the confessional structures within the educational system, we are in agreement with the recommendation dealing with the amendment of the legislation governing the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* and the *ministère de l'Éducation*. However, we must not simply do away with structures related to confessionality. Rather, it seems important to us that they be replaced by a multiconfessional commission attached to the *ministère de l'Éducation*, which will ensure the quality of the religious and spiritual animation service and of the single, non-confessional program of moral and religious education.

## CONCLUSION

As the millennium draws to a close, the spiritual needs of young people in Québec are of paramount importance for their intellectual and moral progress. Subjects such as the origins of humanity are more easily discussed than questions on its destiny. Spirituality, as a search for meaning, is primarily centred on what is ahead of us or what we will become. In searching the past, we seek to find events which can give meaning to the present in order that we may look for a better future. Already, it has been said that the young are pessimistic about the future. Will they find the job they want ? Where are the landmarks on which they can build their lives ? What is the meaning of existence ? Many questions, but few answers. Can school not offer much more ? Public education must take matters of spirituality into consideration, to provide not only a better education but also a better quality of life for the whole of Québec society.

In order to attain these objectives, the Protestant Committee proposes the following recommendations to the Minister:

1. the implementation of a single, non-confessional program of religious education which takes account of personal spiritual development, the concept of transcendence and the reality of today's Québec society, while favouring cohesion between collective and individual rights;
2. sufficient time on the schedule to assure the credibility of the religious education program;
3. the provision of a flexible structure and the necessary funding for the professional development of teachers in religious education, so as to ensure the quality of training for this program;
4. the abolition of Catholic and Protestant moral and religious education programs and of moral education, and their replacement by a single non-confessional religious education program;
5. the abolition of the confessional status of schools;
6. the possibility for governing boards to define educational projects without legal restriction as to religious content;
7. amendments to the legislation governing the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* and the *ministère de l'Éducation* to abolish the confessional committees and replace them by a multiconfessional commission, attached to the *ministère de l'Éducation*. This commission will ensure: (a) the development and implementation of the single non-confessional religious education program; (b) the development of a quality spiritual animation service, and (c) the

professional development and initial teacher training for religious education;

8. the abolition of the positions of Associate Deputy Minister for the Catholic faith and the Protestant faith; to be replaced by a senior officer whose mission would be to ensure communication between the new multiconfessional commission and the Minister of Education and to guarantee that decisions of the commission are implemented.

To summarize, we would stress the importance of respecting and supporting the rights of both parents and students within the educational community. It is essential to safeguard the heterogeneous nature of our education system in our schools, while encouraging a common program to create an integrating movement. As we wrote in 1996, in a brief entitled *A Common Public Culture for Québec Schools*, "The biggest challenge that the education system will have to face in the year 2000 is to fashion unity out of diversity."

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