



THE NEW OUTLOOK

FOR RELIGIOUS

EDUCATION IN

THE SCHOOLS

Québec   
Comité catholique

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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION  
IN THE SCHOOLS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 A CHANGING POLITICAL, SOCIAL, CURRICULAR AND PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Legitimacy reaffirmed .....	7
1.2 Religious education in a changing school curriculum.....	8
1.3 A sociological explanation.....	10
1.4 Changing pedagogical bases: the contribution of the social constructivist perspective .....	12
<b>CHAPTER 2 A LIVING RELIGIOUS CULTURE AS A CROSSROADS OF MEANING .....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 The meaning of stories .....	16
2.2 The advantages and disadvantages of individualism.....	18
2.3 A community dimension to hone and repatriate.....	20
2.4 Religious experience, past and present.....	22
2.5 The world as nature and as creation .....	24
2.6 Rejecting violence .....	26
2.7 Love of intelligence .....	31
2.8 The ethical dimension: stereotype, honing, actualization .....	33
2.9 A soulful body or a spirit incarnate .....	39
2.10 A preferential option for the poor.....	41

**CONCLUSION PROVIDING A CREDIBLE INTRODUCTION 45**

**Appendix 1 ..... 47**

**Appendix 2 ..... 49**

## INTRODUCTION

The political debate on religious education in the schools has been long and fraught with concern. The fact that it is finished encourages us to refocus on the meaning and value of religious education in the schools. That segment of the population that opts for a Catholic religious education for its children expects this education to be authentic, adapted and meaningful, in the same way as their scientific, linguistic, historic or artistic education. It trusts the educators. This document takes a look at how this expectation can be met serenely, lucidly and realistically, in a context where teacher autonomy is prized, where schools are being empowered and, by the same token, held accountable, and where an overall curriculum renewal is under way.

Politically speaking, there were four options: 1) taking away the existing right by completely eliminating religious education from the schools; 2) maintaining this right while providing religious education about various different religious affiliations; 3) slightly broadening religious education to include new groups; and, finally, 4) implementing something of a social sciences course discussing the religious phenomenon as a whole. Option 2 was chosen. Contemporary pluralism in terms of faith or non-belief, which options 1 and 4 would have excluded from the school's purview, will continue to exist in schools, although to a lesser extent than they would have under option 3. In its choice, Québec maintains a practice that largely predominates in old Western democracies: the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, western continental Europe excluding France and part of Switzerland. In so doing, it rejects the US model, which, in practice, pushes Catholics towards the private school system.

Albeit reduced, the place for education in one's own religious affiliation continues to be offered in elementary school and in Secondary Cycle One. In the coming years, might it even be broadened to include other religions? **For the time being, the question is: "How can we ensure that the place allocated to religious education best fulfils the latter's role from an educational viewpoint?"** Such is the challenge now facing Catholic religious education. The right to this education has been reaffirmed. The time has come to prospectively and proactively examine its current status and immediate future.

The Catholic Committee of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation acknowledges the legislative changes that will result in its being replaced by other bodies. It wishes to end its work with a positive outlook for the future. Consequently, in this document, it intends to examine various elements in a context that is both demanding and promising: a pedagogical context—one of curriculum reform — and a context of cultural

vitality and far-reaching change in religious terms as such. Many of the views voiced since the Estates General on Education, in particular, have led the legitimacy of religious education in the schools, be it Catholic or other, to be questioned. In order to face the future confidently and serenely, we would do well to begin by rethinking some of the objections raised with respect to the government's decisions. Despite those aspects of the reorganization that remain problematic, notably in terms of time allocation, the process encourages us to reaffirm the educational validity of religious education and to situate it in the context of the pending program reform. Finally, an examination of the outlook for the future of religious education in the schools, which this document will naturally discuss from a Catholic point of view, gives rise to deliberation on its authenticity, its value per se. What is the basis for hoping that it will be good? To a great extent, it may be a matter of appropriately linking it with what might be termed its fundamental references or cornerstones.

We will begin by looking at issues related to schools and society, namely, the democratic legitimacy of religious education, contrasting sociological appraisals of its current significance, and the context of curriculum reform. Then, we will turn to the facets of living Catholic culture that are particularly compatible with the concern for an authentic, deeply-rooted religious education.

## **CHAPTER 1      A CHANGING POLITICAL, SOCIAL, CURRICULAR AND PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT**

Much of the uncertainty surrounding religious education and other issues since the Estates General on Education has been resolved. The fact that the debate on the place of religion in the schools and on the Proulx report is finished clarifies matters somewhat. However, an overview of the current context is in order.

### **1.1 Legitimacy reaffirmed**

The recent debate on the place of religion in the schools raised all kinds of questions on the nature and legitimacy of religious education in the school context. Observation of the diversity of practices in Western nations supports the belief that a certain range of institutional choices can be defended from a democratic viewpoint. While this is true, it is ultimately up to the State to decide among the different preferences, by establishing rights through legislative channels.

Through Bill 118, the Québec government reviewed and updated the provisions related to religious education in the public schools. It has chosen to continue offering a choice between moral education and Catholic/Protestant moral and religious education. A program of ethics and religious culture could be offered locally beginning in Secondary I and would include all students in Secondary Cycle Two. Ecumenical programs could also be offered in the first cycle.

The State has confirmed the relevance and legitimacy of Catholic moral and religious education in schools that admit students of either denomination. The Minister of Education stated the basis for this decision in a policy statement published last spring.<sup>1</sup>

The school's mission includes a responsibility for helping young people understand the symbolic universe of Québec. This involves "beyond the recognition of religious pluralism and emerging cultures, a certain understanding of the specific role that the Judeo-Christian tradition has played and continues to play in Québec culture".<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations*, Québec, May 2000.

2. P. 4.

This responsibility is based on the school's mandate to ensure the individual's overall education.

"Religious instruction falls within the educational objectives of the school, and the teaching approach is in line with that used in other courses. It does not seek to proselytize or indoctrinate but to further the human, moral and spiritual growth of young people. Just as other courses help them deal with other types of realities, religion courses help them find their way among the moral and religious traditions of their families and of the other people they must learn to live in harmony with. This is an aspect of cultural initiation and socialization that fits in with the mission of the school."<sup>3</sup>

Religious education, freely chosen to mirror liberty of conscience, has an educational value to the extent that it helps students achieve fuller understanding and greater freedom. This is why it has a place in schools here, as in a great many other modern, democratic countries. This education will, no doubt, continue to evolve, as it has for a good many years now. However, schools could benefit significantly from a certain stability in the basic directions that have recently been democratically decided on. People of differing opinions will have to make an effort to arrive at a dialogue and mutual understanding to ensure that the work involving young people can be carried out serenely and in an atmosphere of goodwill.

## 1.2 Religious education in a changing school curriculum

As legitimate as religious education in the schools may be, it is only one facet of religious education per se, one of three fundamental pillars, the other two being the family and the faith community. Religious education in the school context cannot replace either of the other contexts. Each has its place: schools cannot be substituted for the parents or the Church. To understand why, it is instructive to situate religious education in terms of curriculum objectives as a whole, as reflected in the current program reform, since religious education has a great deal in common with all other dimensions of academic education.

The curriculum has both objective and subjective aspects. Subjectively speaking, from the students' viewpoint, the curriculum initiates them, introduces them into a world shaped by past generations, and equips them to take their place in an adult world and contribute to the train of events.

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3. P. 10-11.

Objectively speaking, the curriculum opens spheres of meaning and action that are an integral part of the society in which we live. It unlocks the world of the arts, sciences, history, geography and written language, symbolic tools for quantitative processing and analysis and even a specific religion, if we so desire.<sup>4</sup>

The programs related to each discipline or field provide selected information. Introducing is not tantamount to telling all: it constitutes providing sufficient points of reference and instilling a basic familiarity to enable individuals to embark on a process of lifelong learning, interpretation and enrichment of their basic knowledge. This is as true for religious education as it is for the arts and sciences.

### *Religious education in the wake of the reform*

The current curriculum reform involves all programs of study and disciplines. What incentive for renewal is there for religious education? We must stress the emphasis on universal or so-called cross-cutting skills; the desire to avoid an excessively analytical predefinition of each program; the relationship between the various disciplines and areas of life experience.

To begin with, there is a desire to have education, including religious education, methodically and sustainably solicit **cross-cutting skills**: intellectual, methodological and social skills and skills involving expressing oneself and communicating. This concern, which is common to religious education and the rest of the school curriculum, distinguishes religious education from a catechesis rooted in the faith community and directed at other ends.

Secondly, the current reform seeks to prevent excessive program breakdown into a series of linear mini-objectives. This involves focusing learning on essential goals centred on broad **disciplinary skills**. By focusing on a limited number of goals, the programs strive to leave room for teachers' professional qualifications. For years now, religious education programs have concentrated on five "essential learnings" divided into different skills in keeping with the reform underway.

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4. This highlights the paradox which consists in opposing introduction to a given religion and cultural education discussing the religious phenomenon. Education in a specific religious affiliation is not less cultural. It is simply rooted in the sphere of religious meaning, while cultural education hinging on the religious phenomenon is rooted primarily in history and sociology, and discusses all religions. In a curriculum meant to provide access to the spheres of meaning comprising our world and culture, religious education to date and education rooted in the social sciences pertaining to religion are "cultural" by definition, albeit each according to its own dictates.

Thirdly, the current reform seeks to build bridges, define convergences and establish ties based on affinities between disciplines and something termed **fields of life experience**. It is, no doubt, in this way that the present reform concerns Catholic religious education most, namely, from the viewpoint of its contribution to the fields of life experience. More specifically, which bridges should be built and which affinities and convergences developed between religious education, **citizenship education and international understanding**? What of our **active responsibility vis-à-vis the environment**? And daily **social interaction**? We will come back to these questions later, when we look at some of the cultural themes related to religious education.

### 1.3 A sociological explanation

The debates generated by the Proulx report led to differing sociological analyses. We need to understand the value of empirical comments on Christianity, here or elsewhere, for religious education. Current religious sociology is particularly attentive to four interrelated aspects of religion:

1. belonging to a faith community (community and identification aspect);
2. the ethics or system of values characteristic of a religion;
3. spirituality or looking inward;
4. the core convictions, characteristic doctrine or symbolism specific to a religion.

These various aspects also apply to religious education.<sup>5</sup>

Sociology, as concerns Catholicism and Christianity, is in the process of moving away from the paradigm of secularization which dominated much of the 20th century. Broadly speaking, it consisted in holding that Catholicism and modernity were incompatible and that, as a result, the more modern a society, the more de-Christianized. However, the fact that religious belief has persisted has increasingly forced sociology to take a different tack. Modern-day attitudes and the individualism that accompanies them are profoundly changing religious forms. **The highly personal quality of belief has come to the fore, and ties to a community have become looser**, less regular and more variable throughout our lives. Of the four above-mentioned aspects, spirituality has definitely been least affected. The ethical aspect has undergone some change and the

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5. These dimensions are closely related to those described in *Voies et impasses* (Catholic Committee of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, Québec, 1974 and following). This document, however, proposed a personal integration approach that is less present in sociological observation and analysis.

community element and the form belief takes have been influenced considerably. As Danièle Hervieu-Léger<sup>6</sup> recently pointed out, a believer's very identity is less often acquired once and for all than built through a long process replete with ups and downs. The institutional aspect of religion has changed substantially as ways of believing are renewed. Compared to pre-World War II Catholicism, it could be said that we are witnessing the emergence of a new religious culture, that is, a means of hearing and understanding the Gospel that differs significantly from that prevailing until the mid-20th century.

### *The importance of and religious meaning of the social dimension*

Sociology pays particular attention to the social aspect of Christianity and Catholicism, which cannot confine itself to an individual, isolated spiritual search. The social, community element is integral to it. However, the evolution of current religious thought has returned to valuing the faith community as a shared experience and conviction expressed, while relativizing the organizational and institutional aspect stressed formerly. Sociology's empirical observation concurs with an important position of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), namely, that the **Church is, first and foremost, the People of God, that is, the entire faith community**, rather than simply a hierarchical organization.

### *One step in a long series*

Sociological interpretation is related to discernment that is specifically religious and directly complementary to history. In other words, Catholicism's long history can shed light on its present. In this vein, two means of discerning successive periods in history are very helpful.

According to the first breakdown, whose basis is primarily theological, we can distinguish five successive periods.<sup>7</sup> To begin with, for a number of decades after the death and resurrection of Christ, echoing a very recent contemporary event, the "message", or Good News, was propagated with awe and courage. This first period was rapidly succeeded by a second in which New Testament writings took on significant meaning and the scope of the Word of God, much as those of the Old Testament. For a long time, during a period extending virtually from the 4th to the 16th century there

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6. *La Religion en mouvement. Le pèlerin et le converti*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999, p. 72-74. See also: Raymond Lemieux, "Histoires de vie et post-modernité religieuse" in R. Lemieux and M. Milot (ed.). *Les Croyances des Québécois*, Québec, Cahiers de recherche en sciences de la religion, Vol. II, 1992.

7. See Frederick E. Crowe, "Theology and the Past: Views on the Sources", in *Science et Esprit*, n° 3 (1979), p. 21-33.

was an effort to systematically formulate "what to believe". As of the 16th century, the revival of a historical conscience led to a demand for Biblical support that was more direct where religious beliefs were concerned: "What is your basis for supporting a certain doctrine?" was the type of underlying question that engendered the divergences marking the Reform and also redirected Catholic theological and spiritual thought. These stages constitute the backdrop to the current period, which may be seen as one of a growing awareness that the Revelation bears its fruits within the historical context, thus, that the present is also a time where the Spirit is active and the understanding of the Gospel continues to progress. This is why the **acclimatization of faith to a culture that has changed considerably, despite a certain dimension of destabilization inherent in this change, does not preclude equanimity.**

Another breakdown, this time into historical periods along the lines of a relationship with power and a sociopolitical context, is also enlightening. The early Middle Ages, before and after the year 1000, were marked by an ideal or a **Christian utopia**, in which religion permeated all aspects of one's life. Immediately after the 12th or 13th century came a period of more definite separation of the spiritual and the "worldly", and of a power struggle: the religious power of the Church versus feudal, monarchical and sometimes republican powers. To some extent, on the Catholic side, this era ended with the elimination of the Papal States in the 19th century, at the time of the unification of Italy. Complicity with the political powers that he has gradually disappeared since that time, along with the attendant dependence. This is shown clearly in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and its proclamation of the Church as the faith community. **The Church became a force to be reckoned with, without state or political power as such. As politics moved away from religion, religion left the political forum. It could only be more authentic as a result.**<sup>8</sup>

#### 1.4 Changing pedagogical bases: the contribution of the social constructivist perspective

Departmental documentation on the education reform and the spirit of the renewed programs is based on a social constructivist perspective, used as a theory of knowledge that underpins and legitimizes productive teaching practices. This theory reflects the main tenets of active pedagogy, which have strongly influenced religious education in the schools since the time of the Parent report. How does an educational paradigm centred on learning

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8. This historical evolution leads religious sociologist Jean-Pierre Willaime to hold that history's gradual removal of religion from politics gives Christianity the hope of an original promising future. See: *Le Christianisme : une religion de l'avenir de la religion?* in René Rémond (under the direction of), *Les Grandes Inventions du christianisme*, Paris, Bayard, 1999, p. 227-246.

come to be? From a social constructivist perspective, the mind of a student grappling with rules of written language, intelligibility of mathematical operations, a scientific approach based on data whose complexity is ever-growing builds, develops, expresses, conceptualizes and applies its own knowledge. This knowledge emerges from the reorganization of existing knowledge, be it only in terms of word meaning. It may, at time, involve disturbing existing knowledge in the form of a sort of deconstruction-reconstruction.

The social aspect of the social constructivist theory of knowledge warrants particular attention. In school, the child or adolescent, does not re-engineer grammar, biology, or music, since "no man is an island". The teachers' mediation between the student and the cultural sphere of reference in play (arts, sciences, religion) allow for a measured, progressive, balanced introduction. From the student's viewpoint, this introduction does not constitute passive ownership.<sup>9</sup> It is more successful if it triggers and mobilizes the intellectual activity of reconstruction. This is the essence of the pedagogical message corresponding to a social constructivist view of knowledge.

As concerns social and professorial mediation, the richness of learning depends largely on the adult's credibility. Before "knowing for ourselves", after completing advanced studies in chemistry, that water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen, we believe, we take another's word for it, because it is a known truth affirmed by people in whom we trust, namely, our teachers, and by books. **Early on, we learn a great many things, beginning with our mother tongue and trust in others.** The same is true with respect to religion.

Two aspects of religious education warrant particular attention from the viewpoint of teaching practices based on social constructivism. The first concerns the connection between experience and knowledge. The second deals with the relation between religious education, social practices and a world of meaning.

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9. In an effort to remove the temptation to believe oneself a master and possessor of "the" truth, from a dogmatic viewpoint, constructivism, be it social or not, is sometimes reoriented toward a philosophical belief regarding the very nature of knowledge. In so doing, we move to the opposite extreme, to a relativism in which exist only individual beliefs, all of which can be reduced to equal opinions. Clearly, the social constructivist theory of knowledge need not lead to disqualification of knowledge or subjectivism. It is much more closely related with the insistence of Fernand Dumont, for instance, to establish as the "locus of culture" *par excellence* the act of stepping back and of critical reappraisal, in a "second culture", of the mixed contributions of the "first culture". In the balance to be sought between the mind's receptivity and its activity, social constructivism stresses the intellect's dynamic, its momentum, acknowledging the contribution of all stakeholders. This dynamism exists when we are called to advance towards knowledge, at school or elsewhere. In a text entitled *Overcoming Epistemology*, Charles Taylor shows the connection between a modern philosophical attempt to find a basis for the knowledge's validity and the various effects of its disappointment (*Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1995, p. 1-19).

## *Experience and its meaning*

Religious intuitions and beliefs give meaning to our experience. How apt a teaching method is for religious education depends partially on the balance it establishes between experience, on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other, as well as on the ties it forges between experience and its inherent meaning.

Those elements of the Christian heritage that are received and transmitted are formulated with reference to human, therefore universal, experience: hunger, thirst, taking care of friends and family, meals, the parent-child relationship, speaking and listening, singing, the beauty of the world. Past generations pass down an interpretation of their spiritual experience, witness the words of the prophets: the meaning of fidelity, promise, catastrophe and reprieve, a certain sense of time experienced under God's gaze. The religious experience accumulated and interpreted over the centuries becomes meaning, convictions, traditions. We must ensure that these two extremes remain linked: experience becomes a source of learning through interpretation, which gives it meaning, and the assimilation of religious knowledge is designed to help discover a meaning for experience.<sup>10</sup>

## *Initiation and practices*

A second element, namely social reference practices, is replete with pedagogical meaning and is worth bearing in mind with respect to religious education. Unlike fields of education that are restricted to facts, such as the sciences, religious education is rooted in a set of knowledge that combines meanings for the intellect and for social practices. **Religion's community facet is also part of a basic introduction**, which is not confined to the doctrinal and the symbolic. Didactic transposition from a world of facts, such as mathematics, history or physics is easier, better understood and better "honed" than didactic transposition based on social practices, such as acting like a citizen in a democracy, interpreting a play, orchestrating a joint effort or playing a team sport. Religion's social practices are carried out in spaces and times specific to the faith community, but religious education must seek to elicit a meaning from these practices. In part, it finds, therein, an enactment of the convictions and discernments it helps to understand, like the old saying *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (the way we believe stems from the way we pray).

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10. This idea will be developed further on, in Section 2.4.

## CHAPTER 2      A LIVING RELIGIOUS CULTURE AS A CROSSROADS OF MEANING

Criteria such as relevance, coherence, balance and actualization apply to all curricula. Religious education is no exception. Relevance hinges on motivational teaching practices and a positive relationship between the dimensions of "experience" and "knowledge". Balance and coherence are particularly dependent on having the programs' five main areas of competency converge and corroborate one another: the biblical source, the main beliefs, the ethical sense developed, openness to an inner dimension and understanding different religious or areligious options. But what makes religious education in the schools authentic and constitutes its main quality is, no doubt, its ability to actualize, that is, its **reference to a living religious culture solidly rooted in the current context, with its problems and riches.**

While it is true that children and young people develop age-appropriate religious cultures, the religious education dispensed is often that of an adult culture, which changes, redevelops and becomes associated with the cultural context into which it is being integrated. It is not easy to prepare for explaining **today's meaning** of the religious message to children and young people. The great majority of those responsible for religious education in the schools are not specialists. **What types of religious cultural reference points are particularly useful for assuming this responsibility?** We will be exploring this question briefly as a backdrop to a religious education in the schools intended to be meaningful and authentic. How can we ensure that the reference developed by the adult teaching in the school context is not reduced to the paltry remainder of an extensive erosion, but rather provides a basis of confidence that is not unduly destabilized by fads venerating the exotic or the New Age, for instance?

Certain ethical, spiritual and religious themes particularly highlight the contemporary changes in outlook that may be reflected in the basic cultural introduction to the Catholic religious context. Other themes involve an encounter between religion and the social, scientific or artistic culture into which religious meaning is introduced. We will outline some of these many themes that are closely tied to basic religious introduction and others that are particularly well-suited to the new aspects that the current program reform is trying to impart to the curriculum as a whole. What facets of a living religious culture does this reform solicit? We will look at some below, in the hope that religious education, regardless of its humble place, will play a role in re-actualizing the initial Word.

## 2.1 The meaning of stories

With good reason, **becoming familiar with biblical stories** has been identified as the first major learning objective in religious education in the schools. It is useful to take a moment to look at what underpins an understanding of the meaning of stories. From a tender age, the young child's mind embraces the narrative structure and the stories he is told. We must avoid having him, in adolescence or adulthood, leave these childhood stories behind. To do so, the term "story" itself must be properly interpreted.

The emphasis that was put on stories not so long ago reflected the parallelism that had developed between the tenets of faith in the form of catechism questions and answers and what was termed "the holy story". Current religious education does not promote this dissociation... a definite sign of progress.

**The key, where stories are concerned, is not to equate fictitious children's stories, narratives like the parables, stories with a moral like Old Testament reports** (e.g. the stories of Jonah, Tobias), **historical events that have been extensively reworked to elicit a spiritual meaning** (the flight from Egypt, for example) **and, finally, the events that founded Christianity.**

Religion must be seen as time-specific, and as involving constant reinterpretation. A peasant in hot, dry Sahelian Africa, from an animist background, will have less trouble understanding some of the Gospel's natural and social references than an urban reader in a cold, humid climate! While this does not prevent comprehension, every era and each individual interprets and adapts the timeless Word to make it their own. There is a certain tension between representing a "declaration of faith" as something immutable, that is, leaning towards traditionalism and fidelity, and belonging to a history-in-the-making, that is, **to a generation that, in keeping with its ancestors, reinterprets the present with its own specific characteristics as a starting point.**

Where the child is concerned, the parable, as a story, harks back to ancient times "Long ago...", that is, when Christ taught directly. For an adult, it becomes meaningful in a much vaster historic progression. However, for both, the meaning is very real. If a blind man is healed, the reader or listener might say, in his heart of hearts: "Was I not the blind man or those discouraged companions on the road to Emmaus?"

The Old Testament is replete with reinterpretations, i.e. progressive broadening towards a contemporary and future meaning that sheds new

light on and reinterprets the past. The Jews of the Exodus were seeking the Promised Land, allied to a God who was stronger than the gods of the other nations, although not yet considered the only God. In David's time, they apparently hoped for a dominant earthly kingdom. Then, they came to hope for the primacy of a law written in people's hearts, rather than fortresses or armies. God's unity and the universal nature of his relationship with a given people emerge increasingly.

For two centuries now, reinterpretation of Christian sources has been divided between a "hermeneutics of suspicion" and a positive hermeneutics of reappropriation. On the suspicion side, **the term myth was misused by assimilating a goodly portion of the Bible into the myths of the times.** Yet, these were the writings that dissipated polytheist myths, assimilation of earthly kingdoms to the heavens, the magical or pantheist view of the natural elements, storms, rivers, stars, etc.<sup>11</sup>

The ravages of the hermeneutics of suspicion have led some to steer away from any interpretation whatsoever. Clearly, this is impossible. The search for the Gospel's meaning today occurs within a society whose very language abounds in memory and symbolic meaning accumulated over time. Exegesis prevents the ever-present problem of misunderstanding, safeguarding us from ignorant reading of passages as enigmatic as the two consecutive stories of creation in the book of Genesis, and making us aware of the cultural distance between then and now.

The evolution of understanding and interpretation must result in a meaning for today to be faithful to the entire meaning. Situating ourselves in the present in a religious history-in-the-making means recognizing that today's appropriation of Christianity may differ from the form taken in the last century, the Middle Ages or the early Church, without unfaithfulness or genuine discontinuity. Mistrust and critical distance have a place in perpetual reinterpretation; so does trust, and overwhelmingly so. **Religious education is basically a form of mediation in a very long chain of appropriations and interpretations to reflect today's context.**

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argued that religion resides increasingly in the stories composing a belief, stories that are frequently incorporated into liturgy, songs, plays and practical statements. Proper understanding of the great founding stories, without confusing them with moral tales, no doubt requires using the wealth of interpretive works while knowing how to let the remembrance of these great stories give rise to their present sense.

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11. The writings of Louis Bouyer, in particular, contain a patient explanation of the antimythological sense of biblical writings: see *Sophia ou le Monde en Dieu*, Paris, Cerf, 1994, or: *Mysterion. Du mystère à la mystique*, Paris, Éditions O.E.I.L., 1986.

## 2.2 The advantages and disadvantages of individualism

Although typical of our modern age, individualism is a notion that generates considerable misunderstanding. This misunderstanding has also found its way into the meaning of education. To begin with, let us look at two opposing descriptions. André Charron, theologian at the Université de Montréal, recently wrote:

"Modernity, particularly its fundamental anthropological aspects, should be viewed very positively: affirmation of man as an actor, emergence of personal conscience, autonomy, primacy of individuals over institutions, research and critical questioning, the possibility of making choices and the ideal of controlling one's life, initiative, empowerment and accountability with regard to modernity. Of course, modernity has other offshoots: scientism, technocracy, economic liberalism that generates exclusion, environmental damage. But modernity's anthropological aspects overshadow its negative by-products. These aspects have changed Québec's relation to religion. If gauged accurately, this represents and gives rise to far-reaching change. Individualism, which is too quickly stigmatized as egotism, is a vehicle for self-knowledge and fulfilment as a person in a context of liberty. It is also an opportunity for the search for and growth of one's faith. It is a movement that relativizes the institutional aspect.<sup>12</sup>" [Translation]

This interpretation of individualism sees it as a characteristic of society. There is a contrast between a society where the interests of the group predominate significantly, where fate has predetermined an unchanging place in a clearly hierarchical whole, and modern society, which is both egalitarian and individualist. In this latter context, today's, every one of us is called to lead his life in a spirit of truth, and to freely confer a meaning on that life.

By the same token, individualism may also have its pitfalls, witness Guy Coq:

"The individual sees himself as having absolute freedom. All that comprises my life- he thinks- I must decide myself. All that I am must be of my own making. The human ties I have not chosen, I must have the right to question. Traditions and cultural heritage are *a priori* suspect for conditioning the individual. Similarly, all

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12. A. Charron, "Un profil, des convictions", in G. Lapointe and J.-M. Yambayamba K. (under the direction of), *Vers une foi sans institution?* Montréal, Fides, 1999, p. 157.

authority is often suspect. The notion of obligation tends to become synonymous with constraint.

"Morality itself is no more than a factor in individual appearance: it improves the quality of the "I" and its image, when one contemplates oneself. The ideal of rising above personal gratification, the idea of transcendence, are little valued.

"Ultimately, this individual perceives himself as the only support or subject of law. Only the individual has rights. The concept that society might also have rights, as a group, is not deemed legitimate.

"This individual does not see himself as a Robinson Crusoe on his island. He is not necessarily interested in distancing himself from society. But his attitude towards society is unilateral. He expects society to provide him with everything his heart desires. In return, however, he wishes to make no commitment to society.<sup>13</sup>"  
[Translation]

It is not inevitable, in an era advocating individualism and authenticity, that these values move toward an egocentric mentality. Individualism, as a feature of society, no doubt generates more pluralism in the community of believers than in the past. However, **the goal of each person's fulfilment through education** directly reflects the following facet of modernity: the hope that each person be actively involved in leading his or her life thoughtfully and in dignity, rather than constituting an anonymous element in a crowd or social group.

Ambient individualism makes it difficult to correctly integrate the social aspect of Christianity into religious education. The time seems more prone to personal, intimate and even secret spiritual deepening. This makes it hard to understand group events, collective celebrations. Some participate in the eucharist if, and only if, they feel some motivation, a religious sentiment, a positive incentive. The sense of particularly moving moments in our lives, specific places, sacred actions, symbolic vestimentary colours, symbolic smells (incense is reminiscent of early animal sacrifices, substitutes for human sacrifices since the lesson of Isaac's interrupted sacrifice), rituals and ceremonies (wedding rings, baptismal candles, etc.) is relativized by a significant abstraction of religious belief. If we entrust the issue of collective, community and identity-raising experience to the faith community, reserving religious education for the fields of doctrines and ethics, **religious education threatens to be truncated, without meaning for children, and directed at excessively playing down the concrete, incarnate, factual and historical side of religion.**

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13. B. Descouleurs, with the coll. of G. Coq, *Repères pour vivre. Le livre-ressources des 17-25 ans*, Paris, DDB, 1999, p. 214-215.

## 2.3 A community dimension to hone and repatriate

In a context that gives precedence to a religion of personal faith, **the community dimension is less and less evident**. It is sometimes identified with the institutional, hierarchical and organizational aspect of the Church. We are often too quick to oppose authentic, i.e. personal, faith, to inherited, collective religion marked by doubtful historical features.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, it is useful to try to combine two activities: honing the meaning of community where religion is concerned so as not to have it include just anything; and reacclimatizing or repatriating that part of the community dimension that remains highly relevant for religious education in the schools.

*Between remembering our roots and leaving room for the pluralistic identities of today and tomorrow*

One of the dangerous misunderstandings that made its way into the periphery of the discussions of the Proulx report constitutes too closely linking the community aspect of Catholicism and the national aspect of the collective identity. It is an old connection that was definitely destroyed in the mid-20th century. By being born Chinese, Egyptian or Quebecois, we involuntarily belong to a group that is not of our choosing. Remaining Catholic, Muslim or Buddhist is, on the other hand, not only of our own choosing, but a choice that can always be changed. Consequently, it is imperative that we not confuse these two types of affiliations. For the time being, and even more so in the future, belonging to Québec society is one aspect of our identity; belonging to the Catholic faith community is another, which is independent and very open to the world beyond our geographic boundaries. If this distinction is clear in the present and for the

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14. There is a great burgeoning of critical studies about what could be called the institutional Church, be it questions of ethics, feminist or political issues (calls for internal democratization of decision-making methods, for decentralization)... Everyone has his own ideas on what the Pope should do (See, for instance, Jean-Paul Lefebvre: *L'Église a-t-elle abandonné les croyants?*, Montréal, Éditions Paulines, 1992). A basic religious education does not require one to take sides among rival currents. It is, moreover, interesting to situate these critical concerns in the line of the desire not to "screen" the Gospel, not to change it or make it more difficult to understand... Guy Coq is a good witness of such a concern, which does not end with a process attitude, when he writes: "I would not make the Church an outside obstacle to believers. Because, as a member of this Church, I participate in its collective weight [...] The spiritual dimension cannot be governed according to the dictates of power. In the Church, anything that tends towards the dictates of spiritual life being governed by the dictates of power, that is, the political, corrupts the essential. The agape is corrupted once it is subjected to a discourse of power. At the same time, in my view, what is important is not to oppose an institutional power and a spiritual "power" deemed exaggerated. It is imperative to ensure that the faith community does not make a compromise with the dictates of power. Gospel logic is the opposite of using power over man. Similarly, we must move away from any dynamic of submission or systems based on fear and interdiction. Anything that helps perceive the intimate tie between Christianity and freedom is a step in the right direction." [Translation] (Guy Coq, "Une parole du dedans", in H.-J. Gagey (under the direction of), *Le Bonheur*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1996, p. 211.

future, if, in other words, it is absolutely clear that we are irreversibly rooted in an era of plural identities, it becomes easier to see in Catholicism a dimension of Québec's social and cultural heritage.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it was largely religion that coloured our society's Western character and embracing of the modern era. We live at a time when historical and forced filiations are increasingly replaced by deliberate, chosen personal and collective "affiliations". We are less likely to receive a monolithic, indiscriminating heritage. However, memory based on heritage, including a religious component, is, clearly, better than amnesia.

This aside, the social and collective aspect resulting from personal identification with a given religion, by choice, remains significant. People's spontaneous attachment to Catholicism was shown in the context of the Proulx report. The "we" resulting from a boldly affirmed religious identity can underpin arguments regarding schools based on something of an axiom: "These are our schools. Why would anyone contest our right to teach religion in them, if we so desire?" Ties remain to be forged between "we, as a secular society" and "we, as a community of believers". This latter reference "we" belongs to civilian society. Its influence on political decisions and actions is based on its members' quality as citizens, not as believers or in the political weight of their spiritual leaders.

#### *Personal choice of a faith community*

Increasingly, it is individuals that affirm their religious affiliations; less so, it is organizations or institutional authorities that draw boundaries between members and non-members. Nevertheless, the intensity of one's attachment to a faith community is more variable and its visibility reduced compared to a few decades ago. Sociology has shown that attachment fluctuates between a low degree – inherited feeling of belonging, affinities, inclination to live comfortably in keeping with a certain view of life – called reference community in terms of meaning, a greater degree of participation in group events (participatory community), and a high degree of commitment. Should this fluctuation lead us to centre religious education on the spirituality-interiority aspect to the detriment of the community-identification element, with all of the social practices that are collective in nature? Not likely. Introduction to Catholicism in the schools does not entail experiencing the practices of the faith community but **makes it easier to understand their meaning, decode them, perceive them as significant experiences**. The challenge consists in not losing sight of the deeper, lasting meaning of the community element in its changing, elusive forms.

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15. See Catholic Committee, *Renewing the Place of Religion in Schools*, Québec, Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1999, p. 6-12.

For believers, the word "community", whose secular meaning is common and well-known, also contains the word "communion". The ultimate meaning of communion, in the form of the eucharist, distinctly refers to the divine presence in the most basic of interpersonal contacts. God is not in thunder and lightning, as a prophet learned early on. Nor is he in splendid stained glass windows, golden ornaments, or the trumpets of solemn masses. He is revealed, present and recognizable in the humblest affection. He is desired in the desire to love, at the bottom of the deepest depths of despair.

Forms of collective celebration that touch our hearts probably need to be partially reworked. But the longstanding Catholic instinct to combine festive secular events and the religious fact belongs to a historical heritage. Its anthropological value reflects an age-old promise: "When three or more of you are gathered in my name..."

## 2.4 Religious experience, past and present

Earlier, we pointed out that each main area of the curriculum constitutes a field or sphere of experience and knowledge combined, rather than pure knowledge. From a religious viewpoint, how can we best formulate the question of the proper link between experience and knowledge? We must come back to the "experience" dimension of religious education. Reinterpretation of the meaning of stories, short fables and parables or major founding narratives is based on knowledge, or transmitted meaning. It is the expression of accumulated religious experience, itself also transmitted. What room is left for current experience, for both child and adult? This point also warrants consideration when devising a comprehensive, authentic curriculum.

To begin with, we note that religious meaning, contained in texts and rituals, is expressed in universal situations: parent-child relationships, sibling relations, loving one another, vine-growing, a house's charms, travel, hunger and thirst, the sensation of the wind and breeze, etc. Everyday life is sometimes the stage for profound religious experiences, but these cannot be summoned and are not easily shared. Religious education transmits a condensed version of past religious experiences, those of the prophets, of Christ's followers. Experience gathered and committed to writing becomes a type of history, for example, the history of the Jews' response or non-response to the acts and calls of God.

How can we link deliberated experience accumulated over centuries and current, contemporary, personal experience? How can we avoid having the weight of instituted experience relegate life experience to the backbenches?

Should religious education conjure up experiences analogous to those that children regularly evoke in order to attach inherited meaning? Probably. Does it pave the way for personal religious experiences that will be all the better received, experienced, understood? Hopefully. Religious education often situates itself vis-à-vis potential or future experiences. For instance, God is spoken of as the common father of a large adoptive family. While a child may have experienced filiation, he has not experienced paternity per se. For an adult, being a father or mother is an experience that may comprise an unprecedented religious dimension that furthers and broadens our understanding of divine fatherhood. The child understands this on a general level rather than in reference to personal experience.

*Somewhere between excessive shortcuts and longwinded detours*

In religious education, attention to experience is synonymous with attention and anthropological detour. Moving too directly to the doctrinal crystallization of religious experience means running the risk of forgetting the necessary link with current life experience. However, highlighting current experience alone is insufficient. The anthropological detour would then stop short of religious meaning. Although various widespread, if not universal, human experiences, have the potential for shedding light on faith, in religious education, the quest-for-meaning component may be combined explicitly with the range of experiences, personal or evoked and communicated, that usher in meaning. In so doing, religious education prepares the bases, implements the pre-requisites, for a personal religious experience, without claiming to trigger it. Taking current experience seriously in this way, is not tantamount to trying to vaunt one's "personal experience". On the contrary, it combines knowledge and experience so as to reflect the greatest possible respect for personal experience.

Current experience tends to be shared, thereby constituting the foundation of the faith community. However, there may be ongoing tension between experience and the institutional component of the community of believers. Lise Baroni recently argued that the current religious situation points less to a "crisis of faith" than a "crisis of faith in the community context", which reminds us that the purpose of ecclesiastical bodies is based less on the logistics of any given organization than on a "calling".<sup>16</sup>

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16. "How can we reconcile all of the individual faiths being reworked today? The tension is in reconciling, not domesticating... allowing them to enrich one another, not standardizing them... channelling life, not interfering with it ... fuelling faith, not satiating it. Although contradictory, this tension is essential. Faith will always flee institutions despite the fact that it needs the latter to express itself... and institutions will always get caught up in an other-world composed of order and structures but would die without the intuition and folly of faith. This tension will always exist since, like a tightropewalker on the high wire, balance is only achieved through constant motion." "Vers une institution sans foi ou une foi sans institution?" in G. Lapointe and J.-M. Yambayamba K., *op. cit.*, p. 119.

## 2.5 The world as nature and as creation

The relationship between man and nature has changed profoundly since the 16th-century emergence of experimental science. Galileo's confirmation of Copernican astronomy, which placed the sun at the centre of the planets, and relegated the Earth to one of them, is a handy reference for our world beginning to be turned topsy-turvy. Nature obeys laws or constants expressed in mathematical terms. Decline of geocentricity, new portrayals of the Earth and astronomical sky diverged from those commonly used in the Bible. Slowly, there was a move towards complete "disenchantment of the world". Already Christianity had dissociated natural sites and forces from the semi-sacred aura of early religions. But today's culture has gone even further, moving towards a completely secularized view of nature: not good or bad, beautiful or ugly, enthralling or tragic... nature to be examined and measured using a microscope, telescope, chemists' scales and in the accelerators of atomic particles.

Concern for the environment gradually emerged as scientific knowledge, and technological advances made it possible for societies to considerably change the face of nature. Industrial ravages were widespread: cities choking in foundry smoke, forests decimated by overharvesting, watercourses practically poisoned by all manner of waste, air heavy with carbon dioxide, desertification. At the same time, man learned to resituate the long-term formation of our globe, the continents, the emergence of life on our planet. We had to accept that early man bore very little resemblance to the Michelangelo's Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. For many decades, it was extremely difficult to reconcile the Christian belief in Creation and the theory of the evolution of the human species. In some US states, there are still people who see the book of Genesis and its stories about Creation as rivalling the theory of evolution in biology instruction.

Unfortunately, the scientific interpretation of evolution, and man's place therein, did not remain confined to the field of experimental science. It took on a sociological bent in the survival of the fittest, which propagated a cruel view of Nature's selectivity, associated with domination by the strongest, a concept used to legitimize racism and even eugenism, for example with the legal forced sterilization of the handicapped. However, after the materialist, positivist view of nature peaked in the late 19th century, state-of-the-art research found affinities and convergences with spiritual questions, as shown in the works of Hubert Reeves and David Suzuki.

Does the Christian or Judeo-Christian tradition promote a specific relation to nature? Where does the world's beauty orient the spirit? Is it possible to reconcile seeing nature as God's creation with seeing nature in terms of the scientific and the secular? It is particularly important to ponder this

question at a time when the curriculum encourages each discipline to **contribute to awakening students to the meaning of the environment and their responsibilities in this regard**. Certain environmental ideologies reflect early religions: the worship of Gaia, the Earth mother, irrational re-enchantments of plants and animals... There is a variant of deep ecology that resembles a religious belief. Have we reached the point where we can shelve an ideology of world domination in favour of a model of healthy stewardship?

The current context exhorts us to re-examine the resources of the Christian heritage. Modern times have focussed religious elements anthropologically and psychologically. In the past, the sense of a cosmic Christ was more alive. What is the place of nature, which scientists study and industrialists exploit, sometimes thanklessly and without concern for future generations, between the first Creation and the New World promised with the coming of the new Adam? Why do we use the word "creation" for both the composition of a symphony and for the origin of the world? Theologian Adolphe Gesché recalls the affinities of the idea of creation with a less brutal world, one less caught up in the short-term exploitation of its resources.

"We propose seeing the cosmos no longer as the purview of man, but of God. More precisely, of his Logos, his Word. It would no longer be a matter of making the Earth sacred, tantamount to once again reducing the consistency and autonomy of the cosmos to nothingness... precisely what we are seeking to prohibit. It would involve stating or recalling that this world, *from a time before us*, was already worked and traversed by rationality and intelligibility, by logos [...] Does the Christian idea, that the Word of God, which "was with God" (John, 1,1), "lived among us" (John, 1,14) "came to what was his own" (John, 1,11), not gloriously affirm that the cosmos can also be seen as the home of God? Not to infringe on our domain: we are not even able to recognize Him (John 1,10). But because he too is and rejoices in this world, delighting in the human race (Proverbs, 8,31). Because the world, and not only man, is the expression of a will, the presence of goodness, beauty and truth: land of logos. Man is, thus, encouraged to see in the cosmos a glory that comes from on high [...] Because man has seen his glory (John, 1,14), a glory that is not at all incandescent, all-powerful and murderous, because *very simply, like man, it is full of grace, charm and truth.*"<sup>17</sup>  
[Translation]

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17. *Le Cosmos*, Paris, Cerf, 1994, p. 19. Catherine Chalié's book, *La Nouvelle Alliance*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1989, is also a revival of a very rich heritage of Jewish religious thought on nature, closely linked to current ecological conscience.

Contrary to the ideas of the 19th century, the record of experimental scientific thought is longer seen as antagonistic toward religious experience and thought. While this context should not be used to reconstitute all kinds of shaky concordances, we cannot ignore the potential religious meaning of the experience of those who devote most of their energy to active scientific knowledge. Witness, this testimony of a bachelor's student in biology in response to a trial of the irrationalism of the Christian faith:

I am a student finishing his bachelor's degree in biochemistry. During my studies, I discovered to what extent life is so marvellously organized, beautiful and immense including the infinitely small. Rather than pulling me away from God, this discipline has brought me closer to Him.<sup>18</sup> [Translation]

**It is possible to convey the Christian meaning of Creation to young minds** which enthusiastically embrace the very high intelligibility, disclosed by science, of stones, metals, plants, trees, animals, the planets and the stars. There is definitely a significant gap between the biblical concept of Creation and the modern-day concept of nature, left to chance and the probabilities of emergence, impassible, governed by the law of the survival of the fittest. But it is the very awareness of this gap that invokes the additional meaning of an ongoing creation, a creation partly entrusted to man, in keeping with today's widespread awareness and ecological commitments.

## 2.6 Rejecting violence

In today's culture, one of the main sources of reticence vis-à-vis Christianity is its historical tolerance, and even condoning, of violence. Ultimately, this can lead to disqualifying Christianity on the basis of ethics intended to be more universal, purer, more ambitious. It is difficult to actualize the Christian message without the spectre of the longstanding suspicion of a community of believers historically compromised by the use of violence.

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18. Louis-François Bélanger, "Les contradictions en sciences de l'éducation" in *Au fil des événements* (weekly publication, Université Laval), February 24, 2000, p. 8.

Jean-Louis Schlegel recently echoed the media's acknowledgement of complicity and failings:

"Virtually all public conferences or debates on Christianity have raised the issue of Christian crimes and violence: anti-Semitism, first and foremost, the Crusades, the Inquisition, religious wars and divisions along religious lines, burning witches at the stake, the 19th-century condemnation of the rights of man and freedom of conscience, colonization, and the Holocaust, to be sure... Clearly, the subject has historically been over-simplified, and Catholicism is an ideal scapegoat for explaining the errors of yesterday and the discomfort of today to people who are increasingly strangers to the Catholic tradition. The errors attributed to Catholicism exonerate us quite well from the darker pages of our Western history. This is foreign to us, thank God. The Catholics are there to repent and it is a good thing for them (perhaps on other continents, where Westerners are often called Christians, a more just view of history exists...).

This pressure to lay guilt at the Catholics' feet is difficult to refute since it is nebulous, cliché-ridden, irrational and, at the same time, unchallengeable. When it does not delegitimize speaking up, it calls for modesty (it is striking how statements of repentance change nothing, at best, they constitute a minimum, or a first step). The pro-human rights struggles waged by Jean-Paul II and many other Christians today cannot offset this past. Some suspect a new conversion strategy or (based on certain ambiguities) a feint: still others contest a Christian appropriation of these rights....<sup>19</sup>  
[Translation]

Believers' and non-believers' views of the historical errors of the Christians, whether Catholic or not, diverge in every respect. Non-believers generally take a political view of religions, seeing them as big machines for exercising social control. Believers feel that between the ideal of loving one's neighbour, justice and universal respect, and one's actual behaviour, the capacity of the human will, unaided, regularly falter, and that the faith community perceives itself as a community of the fallible. The same forgiveness is asked of God and the victims of these weaknesses. Asking for this forgiveness collectively reflects the hope, but does not guarantee that it will be possible to correct oneself and not fall into the same patterns.

Around a potential sea of retrospective and collective guilt complexes, this raises the paradox expressed by Paul Thibaud some years ago:

"We would be remiss to say that the foundation of democracy is cynical. It is based on an ideal of non-exclusion. We could say that

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19. Jean-Louis Schlegel, "Intellectuels catholiques : silences contraints, silences voulus", in *Esprit*, March-April 2000, p. 93-94.

today we live in the most evangelical society ever, one that has abolished the death penalty, one that does not leave the old to die, that helps the unemployed [...] The paradox is that the moral ideal that was the basis of democracy has been forgotten, due to its very universalism. Since these obligations are those of everyone and no-one, we feel that today we live in a time of rights and not obligations. Moral requirements are presented from the viewpoint of the one asking (right) and not the viewpoint of the one responsible (obligation).<sup>20</sup>[Translation]

### *Attention to immediate surroundings and commitment*

As concerns the religious education of children and adolescents in the schools, it would be useful to look at the problem of violence close to home. It is easier to love mankind as a whole than the people we deal with every day, in our family and at school. Citing in class, or having students embrace the age-old saying, "blessed are the meek...", is compatible with the professional educator's or teacher's commitment that can take root in civil and secular convictions. **Faith converges with a social and institutional perspective in the school context of educational resistance to violence.** In this vein, Anne Leclerc and Alain Cyroulnik present the following truths:

"Often violent children are, or have been, victims of violence. To try to find a solution to this violence, we must define its causes. There are many forms of violence, not just one. The social violence experienced every day by families whose situation is precarious is a critical factor in the loss of points of reference and the discrediting of society's rules. A dehumanized, desocialized environment adds further insecurity and enhances the sense of exclusion. This daily violence is imposed and intolerable. For many young people, school, as an institution, represents violence on a daily basis because the effort required for daily school work is difficult in a fragile family context. The idea that school does not serve all students in the same way is one of the essential causes of the development of violence. Although school can help reduce inequality, it cannot eliminate it.

"The more the school takes responsibility for group or individual work, the more it enhances each student's chances of succeeding and the more school learning makes sense. This can go far in reducing the violence generated by the feeling of failure when added to social exclusion. Reinstating this school function is tantamount to once again restoring its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of young people. We must eliminate anything that naturally creates violence: all young people must be able to have a

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20. "La communauté de responsabilité", in *La Société en quête de valeurs. Pour sortir de l'alternative entre scepticisme et dogmatisme*, (Laurent de Mesnil pub.), Paris, Maxima, 1997, p. 202.

full meal at school, for a fee or free of charge. No one can think or work properly on an empty stomach, especially those for whom this is the only real meal.

We need to give our schools a human dimension again to reconstitute a community whose young people and adults know and recognize each other. This is the prime requisite for dialogue and mutual respect. Anonymity is violence suffered. When words are no longer possible, some turn to violence as the only means of expression."<sup>21</sup> [Translation]

**Schools do teach non-violence outside religious education classes**, based on the entire teaching team's lucid and explicit commitment. This commitment is voiced in the educational project when it is implemented and underpins an institutional culture of respect for others, non-segregation, distaste for debasing and humiliating others. This does not mean that religious education is silent on the subject: deliberation on this topic can be seen on a different level.

Historical mass violence – slavery, genocide, colonization of various sorts – and discreet petty violence, inflicted on a group's scapegoat, the ambient cruelty experienced by so many people who are unloved, all fall into the category of deliberately inflicted evil which the human mind, in the field of history and psychoanalysis, tries to understand. In terms of basic religious education, it is, no doubt, important not to categorize the problem of inflicted evil into a never-ending self-accusation, and, by the same token, to avoid decrying it as purely external to us. Bernard Descouleurs outlines the following understanding of evil, which goes beyond a simple secular ethic:

"Liberation is possible only through *awareness*. However, it is impossible to recognize evil unless one has a *knowledge of good*. Evil is always discovered negatively, in deprivation: death seems bad because we have experienced life. To cite Ricoeur, evil is deviation: "I can only define evil based on that from which it diverges" (*Finitude et culpabilité*, Aubier, p. 160).

It is based on this that we measure the importance of education. How indispensable it is for the child to experience good, values: esteem and respect for oneself, others, beings, recognition and admiration of beauty... But the conscience must be educated one's whole life long.

Awareness leads man to recognize the evil he has done: this is the power of *admission*. In so doing, he identifies the evil, designates it as an *error* and recognizes that he is *fallible*. Awareness, admission and repentance are indispensable steps in eradicating the evil in

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21. "Retrouver des repères", in *Le Monde de l'éducation*, March 2000, devoted to violence in the schools, p. 45.

us. Recognizing evil and condemning it means reintegrating oneself into Humanity, from which one had excluded oneself and become something of a foe. Reconciliation is then possible, since "an enemy that repents is no longer an enemy" (Primo Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, Julliard, p. 191). From that point on, it becomes possible, once again, to build the brotherhood of humankind."<sup>22</sup>

### *Coexistence as an ethic*

Present-day sensitivity to ethics, particularly in young people's commitments and protests, **relativizes, to a certain extent, the stakes of private life and gives precedence to collective challenges.** We are part of large economic, political, regional and national groups and, to some extent, involved in and responsible for the effects of the action and inaction of these large groups. **From the Christian viewpoint, too, the meaning of structural causes of evil is important.** As B. Descouleurs points out again, we must address evil as a political problem:

"We cannot build a world simply by filling gaps. We cannot hope to make the world more humane without tackling the causes of inhuman everyday actions, that is, the social and political systems responsible in many countries for the violation of human rights, the oppression of ethnic minorities, pauperization and exploitation of entire populations, child labour, etc. These are the systems that we must change.

The international associations that fight child sexual abuse and try to free children from the shackles of prostitution have understood this. They put pressure on the governments of the countries in question until they implement legislation suppressing these practices, thereby slowing down the sale of "sexual tourism" by travel organizers.

The social and economic factors producing situations of great poverty and exclusion are very complex, but the human drama they entail is so extensive that we must make an effort to be vigilant. Political awareness is critical, if we do not wish to succumb to the bondage of the dictatorship of economic liberalism that wants us to believe its "catechism" and accept as necessary and inescapable the sacrifice of millions of human beings on the altar of profit.

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22. *Repères pour vivre. Le livre-ressources des 17-25 ans*, p. 131-132.

In the face of this new blackout that reduces man to an object, giving him no other model than that of producer, consumer and merchant and no other ideal than that of the market, belittling liberty and swallowing it in terms of the economy to facilitate its operation, resistance is all-important. Humankind is in danger of regression and decomposition if we continue to agree that the Absolute before which we must all kneel is called Profit.

Resistance to this new form of evil, this new Moloch, requires a political conscience."<sup>23</sup> [Translation]

It is very useful, to help children and adolescents interpret the call of the Gospel in their personal context, to understand how today's reception of the Gospel has moved away from a modern interpretation based on Jansenism. From the 17th to the 19th centuries, the latter stemmed from a very individualist, indeed tragic, view of salvation, in fear, in the scrupulous examination of one's conscience, before a God who judges merit and demerit. This doctrine bordered on Puritanism, stressing the isolated quest for one's own purity rather than the search for a common salvation, the desolation in erring and the joy at forgiveness. Since the mid-20th century, the traces of this period have increasingly faded. Consequently, the social interdependence experienced is more naturally associated with the instinct to "hope for all".

The challenge of education advocating non-violence is much more far-reaching than praise for the culture of being kind in the family, class and school. But **school as a venue for a first commitment remains incontestable**. Should there be a difference between a secular moral education, in this regard among others, and an introduction to the Gospel message where violence is concerned, it might be the following: on the one hand, training in the ability to judge and reason based on moral precepts, and, on the other, seeing that external help and strength are available to help us act and correct ourselves endlessly, despite our failures. The "I will be with you ..." makes a difference, especially here.

## 2.7 Love of intelligence

Religious education in the schools enters into an environment where all fields of learning are encouraged to take generic intellectual skills seriously. This also involves, solicits authenticity, substance, sound themes. Never have students been asked to absorb pre-defined content as little.

The testimony of English teacher Clare Richards puts us on track as regards the convergence of religious education and the intellectual/

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23. *Id.*, p. 132-134.

methodological skills of the *Program of programs*. She describes a change in direction in religious education in recent years, reflecting a broader change in teaching practices:

"Until relatively recently the dominant method of learning was by absorbing knowledge. The teacher was at the top of the pyramid. Pupils took notes. Today, however, debate and shared experience are an important way of learning. Pupil's views are respected, their opinions are invited and they are taught to think for themselves. This is not to say that strong teacher-input is unimportant. Material has to be presented and facts explained. The art of good teaching is to get the balance right."<sup>24</sup>

For Clare Richards, in religious education as well as in other subjects, the teacher's role of guiding and accompanying students is preponderant. It involves both participating in a search for meaning and the ability to accept questions, without silencing the speaker.<sup>25</sup>

Religious education appeals to intelligence, interpretation, critical thinking and judgement. The religiosity of pure emotivity and gregarious warmth leads to deviation towards sects. **It is through its contribution to the exercise of critical thinking that education can indirectly strengthen citizenship education.** Educating citizens involves respecting intelligence and freedom. This is how we create responsible and active individuals who are immune to passing fads:

"Students must be told that religious education addresses them as citizens, that it intends to respect their intelligence and freedom, under their own watchful eye. Respecting students' intelligence means giving the religion course genuine ambition and genuine requirements. It means joining them in a serious quest for what the Christian faith can give humankind, according to a deliberate plan, in a documented manner, with methods as varied and rigorous as in other academic disciplines. [...] Respecting students' freedom in religious education means unreservedly appealing to

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24. "From pyramid to circle", in *The Tablet*, February 12, 2000, p. 186.

25. "There had been a change of thinking in the Church, from conceiving herself as a hierarchical society to seeing herself as a **community**; from a pyramid to a circle. [...] I am involved, in a small way, in training student teachers. It has been an eye-opener to witness the distress of some of them when they have qualified and find themselves in Catholic schools where pyramid has not given way to circle. Here teachers are supposed to know all the answers. Most students today are not going to swallow that one. [...] The schools in the survey [secondary schools] allowed their students the freedom to question and voice criticism where appropriate. Young people can be very critical. We would do well to listen carefully to their general protests in defence of justice and humanity. Some of their criticisms are levelled against the Church itself. People today are more ready to accept others as children of God, whatever their beliefs and lifestyle. Years of teaching have shown me that the Gospel never loses its appeal to the young. By Gospel I mean what Jesus taught by word and example. A rigid teaching of church doctrines can obliterate this." (*Ibid.*)

their freedom of expression, questioning, contesting, appropriation and evaluation."<sup>26</sup> [Translation]

As André Fossion points out, religious education that persists in esteeming and soliciting intelligence is closely related to citizenship education, which requires developing the aptitude for debate and dialogue, while respecting the ethical rules of communication. Religious education that respects and reveres intelligence will definitely promote the aptitude for pluralist debate.<sup>27</sup> In a society such as ours, we are no longer ruled by conventional behaviour, as people were in past traditional societies where each member's role was predetermined. Today, we lead our lives according to the meaning we wish to impart to our actions. Preparing oneself for this freedom and responsibility means forming active individuals who analyze, discuss, understand and make commitments. The cross-disciplinary concern for the skills inherent in intelligence that is receptive, critical, open to dialogue and debate calls for a style of religious education that coincides with the current major concern of citizenship education and takes responsibility for it.

## 2.8 The ethical dimension: stereotype, honing, actualization

Catholicism's relationship to ethics is not simple. It changes, is tempered and honed, something which can be interesting from an educational viewpoint. However, we must avoid falling into the trap of moralism, which would consist – and, on occasion, in the 1970s, definitely did consist – in preponderantly stressing the area of attitudes and classroom rules, giving precedence in religious themes essentially to what sheds light on behaviour.

### *A conventional discourse based on amnesia*

It goes without saying that actual customs are more important than the discourse surrounding them. Nevertheless, where Catholic inspiration for moral education is concerned, we must begin by eliminating the stereotype portrayed by various means, in TV mini-series, popular literature and some so-called "objective" analyses. There is tendency to legitimize current options by stereotyping the recent past, witness the following example:

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26. A. Fossion, "L'enseignement religieux scolaire dans la construction de la société moderne", in Brodeur, R. and Caulier, B. (under the direction of), *Enseigner le catéchisme : autorités et institutions. XVI<sup>e</sup> – XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 1996, p. 426.

27. See *op. cit.*, p. 420-423.

"The members of the Catholic clergy dominated Quebecers with an iron hand. They voiced theological truths that replaced eternal ones. The clerical ethos fuelled feelings of piety which modern man no longer acknowledges. Who was this man of beleaguered heart, speaking the language of the *coureurs de bois*, with a soul dipped in holy water? To begin with, he was a sinner that viewed his future with fear. The slightest violation of church rules caused major guilt feelings to surface. He was driven by a faith that was to help him avoid the evil incarnated by Satan. He resolutely fought his baser instincts to earn a place in paradise. He did not forget to pray to the saints to safeguard the lives of his children and his property.<sup>28</sup>

Barely 25 years ago, the priest preached morality between the Gospel reading and communion. The clerical ethos of the times extended to all of man's daily activities, from the time he rose to the time he went to bed. Even during elections, priests were not shy to make their preferences known.<sup>29</sup>

Québec, before the Montréal World Fair in 1967, was a morally underdeveloped country. Despite the fact that they lived in a democracy, citizens had no access to knowledge, the arts, or moral discussions. The Catholic environment alienated Quebecers, who, attached to their superstitions, accepted the clergy's positions without balking too much."<sup>30</sup> [Translation]

It is not very useful to talk about true or false in cases like this, since they do not really deal in factual judgements. This type of ready-made discourse permeated an entire community of opinion makers, purporting that religion is between the faithful and the clergy, rather than the faithful and God; that it involves fear and threats. From this viewpoint, the Québec that could be "shown", morally speaking, only emerged in the 1960s. This type of discourse develops a stereotype, a single train of thought that does not require evidence to support itself. It is a form of amnesia, the renouncing of an effort to remember by going beyond these stereotypes.

If we think about the mores of the 1930s to 1960s, without giving undue importance to the **discourse** mentioned above, they seem to clear the path for post-Quiet Revolution attitudes and customs: a free-enough mentality, ready to celebrate, marked by relative solidarity, not driven by the work ethic, etc. It is true that ethical deliberation and commitment gradually emerged from religious convictions among a growing number of people since the Quiet Revolution. But to hypothesize that this is the absolute

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28. D. Jeffrey, *La Morale dans la classe*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 1999, p. 18.

29. *Id.*, p. 8.

30. *Id.*, p. 22.

beginning, that, in the 1960s we started all over, a tabula rasa as it were, is another story.

Louis Rousseau penned a more factual retrospective pointing out that, in the 1960s, there was a hedonist current amplified by new-found economic prosperity.

"A new world vision was born, a hedonistic picture of life, which, while not new, (the notion that happiness is the be-all and end-all of life, the individual's duty, dates from the 18th century, if not Antiquity), did not strike us any less in the mid-20th century, with its abundance: the post-war years saw property increase at an extraordinary rate, wages were relatively good, pleasure was always at hand, etc. People aspired to happiness on Earth and the Church offered only a view of Heaven that, with its prohibitions, prevented us from accessing it. [...] The new criteria underlying morality were those dictated by the consumer society: good meant buying, accumulating things. Within the Church, this new hedonism was weighed and accepted. Sermons reflected the fact that, as the 1960s and 1970s progressed, priests stopped saying that we were overly attached to material things. They simply echoed the consumer society message, ultimately saying that people were right to seek happiness, that it was good. Consequently, creation found itself reassessed. The theological theme of the times can be summarized as follows: we must love one another. [...] While it was not immediately obvious, in its priests' new discourse, Catholicism ceased being able to single out evil. It was euphemized."<sup>31</sup> [Translation]

If we look at the role of stereotyping in the process of linking religious convictions and ideals where mores are concerned, how do the twists and turns of recent decades involve the ethical facet of religious education? Awareness of ethics emerges over time, evolving with history. This is also one of the reasons that we are unable to associate the Gospel with a single moral code, outside the historical context, so to speak.

*What repels? What compels?*

In the very long term, the range of what is repulsive to Judaism and Christianity is not all that complex: sacred prostitution, burning children in the fire of Moloch or the sacrifice of first-born males, religious sacrifice of any human being, even captured enemies, polygamy, double standards in the repudiation of a husband or wife, or what is euphemistically referred to as "exposing" undesired newborns, that is leaving them to die. Need we go on...? It took many centuries for slavery to be considered repulsive... It is

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31. S. Baillargeon, *Entretiens avec Louis Rousseau. Religion et modernité au Québec*, Montréal, Liber, 1994, p. 123-124.

less important to consider moral convictions outside their temporal and historical setting, like a hieratic block, than to perceive them as the meeting point of a spirit of discernment and many social forms of wisdom.

"The Bible does not deliver a program for implementation, as such. Aside from the fact that its concerns go beyond the immediate potential of each of us, their projection onto concrete situations is far from obvious. More than mere interpretation, it requires responsible actualization. What is needed is a genuine transfer not a simple translation. This must be the work of each and every one of us. [...] "Responsible actualization": the expression speaks of two things: the need to transfer into unprecedented cultural and historical situations the orientation that the Gospel proposes for man's life, and the fact that the responsibility for performing this transfer falls to people of all eras and cultures. Not by deduction, as a computer might operate according to the premises contained in the Gospel, but by using the resources of their minds and hearts, resources that are real but fallible, nevertheless. On other words, taking responsibility with the attendant inevitable risks, errors and imperfections."<sup>32</sup> [Translation]

The most evident modern-day headway made in Christian moral awareness, progress in which the Protestants clearly led the way, was the return to valuing the ordinary life: in terms of work, the husband-wife relationship, the family as pleasing to God, enlightened by the Spirit of the Beatitudes. On this subject, 19th-century Anglicans had a lovely saying: "God loveth adverbs". In other words, putting one's heart into making soup (fixing streets, teaching, doing business, etc.) is as valuable in God's eyes as chivalrous deeds. God's love was not reserved primarily for those who performed great deeds, nobles, rulers; this was the ethos that developed in from the 17th to the 20th century. How we do things, in other words, the adverb, is as important as what we do!

Clearly, the Reform and Counter-Reform instituted rigid moral standards, rooted, according to some, in hyper-Augustinism, a tradition inspired by a great doctor of the Western Church (4th century) which Jansenius, the founder of the so-called Jansenist trend, invoked extensively in the 17th century. This relatively pessimistic stream, haunted by guilt feelings, seems to be regressing, perhaps due to the fact that life is easier than in the past, with the revival of hedonism, and, no doubt, due primarily to a better understanding of the Scripture. Sociologist Andrew Greeley made the following illuminating comment on this subject:

"In a certain sense, the most difficult conflict within Catholicism is between this instinct that nature is revelatory and the Platonism of St. Augustine, who distrusted and feared nature. The former

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32. Jean Rogues, *Quand la foi prend corps*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, p. 51-52.

appears to be winning at long last, but only an unwise gambler would bet on its final victory any time soon. Orthodoxy, which has never liked Augustine all that much, has avoided this conflict."<sup>33</sup>

*Morality based on rules, morality based on a meaningful life*

Since the early 19th century, under the sway of influential philosopher Immanuel Kant, moral issues were virtually reduced to obeying moral rules. Kant's significant contribution was his emphasis on autonomy, that is, a person's ability to espouse moral obligations on his own, rather than receiving them externally, through fear or imposition by an authority. However, without neglecting the central role of certain things that were forbidden or imperatives that could not be circumvented, moral decision-making increasingly came to look very different: **answering to a search for fulfilment, a full life, a unified interior ordering of values to be hierarchized**, values such as health and friendship, cultural values, genuine personal values. Anglican writer Suzan Howatch has one of her characters express the idea of a full life that includes God, an ideal to be integrated, rather than submission to a list of moral imperatives:

"Human beings need some kind of God in order to feel whole, and if they lose touch with THE God, the right God, they can't rest until they've put something else in his place and elevated it into a false god. The spiritual vacuum always has to be filled. It's the way of the world. It's another part of the human condition. In religious language it's called 'the sin of idolatry'. In the language of psychology it's called—no, never mind, let's keep this simple. "Well, anything can be a false god—money, power, politics, football, science, painting, fashion, fame, communism, pornography, food, drink, sex, atheism—you name it. The pattern is that the person alienated from God sets the false god up on a pedestal in his mind and worships it with increasing intensity and decreasing fulfilment until contact is lost with the real world. One thinks at once, of course, of Adolf Hitler and Nazism, but in fact

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33. *The Catholic Imagination*, Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 2000, p. 192. Andrew Greeley argues that Catholicism's long history and sociology highlight its openness to religious forms that do not detract from Creation: "Of all the world religions which emerged in the last half of the millennium before the Common Era and the first half of the millennium of the Common Era, Catholicism is the most at ease with creation. It has never been afraid (at least not in principle) of "contaminating" the purity of spirit with sensible and often sensual imagery. On the face of it, this compromise with nature religion is strange. All the other world religions and quasi religions (like Platonism) have abhorred the practices and images of nature religion as defilement of spirit. Catholicism, in its better moments, feels instinctively that nature does not defile spirit but reveals it. Hence Catholicism (again, in its better moments) has not hesitated to make its own practices, customs, and devotions of the nature religions wherever it has encountered them." (*Op. cit.*, p. 10.)

this spiritual sickness is very common and not usually destructive on the global scale."<sup>34</sup>

For Christians, as for others, ethics education leads one to work on oneself, "honing" valid behaviours and lucid attitudes. From a Catholic viewpoint, shortcomings and failures are not food for despair but are not removed from the field of responsibility either. It is a matter of trying again, with help. Where rules are concerned, above all, we must remember that the Gospel calls for discernment applied to mores varying by period and society. The moral process begins in a world of accepted values but proceeds with reassessments. The situation of a someone having only his own knowledge to depend on resembles a "tabula rasa" in terms of values based on ethics: in both cases the very idea of education becomes illusory.

"Charles Taylor [...] has used convincing analyses to show that modernity is marked by a thought process that exalts the uprooted individual, despite the fact that the "I" cannot live without a "reference framework", even if this framework is nothing more than the language received in and by a human community (*Les Sources du moi. La formation de l'identité moderne*, Boréal/Le Seuil, 1998). Reason disincarnate, wishing to carry out the project of this modernity, would be powerless in the face of judgement of any sort. Reason can actually only be directed at data received, not in their absence, which it strives to rank, sort, order. This is why Taylor speaks of moral reasoning as a "reasoning in transitions" (p. 72). Such reasoning aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is tacitly or openly, implicitly or explicitly, concerned with comparative statements. And it is easy to understand why Taylor states that this type of reasoning originates in biographical narrative, because it is within this narrative that each person can compare the relative value of a given target goal based on his past experience and personal convictions. How is it possible not to see that this recourse to narratives roots moral reasoning in the uniqueness of a history, but also in a tradition without which moral reasoning would simply not be possible?"<sup>35</sup> [Translation]

In a word, the ethical dimension of religious education in the schools is not disqualified as some stereotypes would have us believe. It is not the heart of the issue. It is neither uprooted nor immobilized. It too has been honed,

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34. *Le Pardon et la grâce*, Paris, J.C. Lattès, 1998, p. 634-635.

35. Paul Valadier, *Un christianisme d'avenir. Pour une nouvelle alliance entre raison et foi*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, p. 151. There is also a strong argument that tends to emerge from ethical deliberations related too exclusively on laws and rules, to open it to the meaning of a life devoted to its fulfilment in C. Taylor, *La Liberté des modernes*, Paris, PUF, 1997, Chap.. 9 entitled "La conduite d'une vie et le moment du bien", p. 285-308.

to advantage, from its former rigor and **is well able to benefit from a current concept of ethics, which centres it increasingly on the search for a "good" life, one that is balanced, whole, fulfilled, rather than on instilling rules.** This ethos is not contradictory to the concern for happiness. However, it does place this desire far above satisfying hedonistic pleasures and utilitarian calculations.

## 2.9 A soulful body or a spirit embodied

We have inherited a dual view of man, body and soul, already marked in the Greek cultural heritage and, strongly reinforced in early modern times with Descartes' philosophy. The Greeks sometimes separated the two to the point of seeing the body as a horse guided by a rider, which is the soul. Contemporary thinkers of the early centuries of Christianity saw our bodies as something of a descent from divine matter to the corruptible, evil, that is, the corporal. A certain heathen mystic consisted in denying one's passions and body to rise to the serenity of the incorporeal divine. In this sociocultural climate, a far cry from that of the Bible, it was practically inevitable for contempt for one's body and its severe treatment to enter into Christian practices and options. At the dawn of modern time, Descartes confirmed and strengthened the old dualism by opposing the concrete (body) and the intangible (spirit, soul) dimensions. The resulting view sees man as an unanchored being able to rationally judge the physical things that happen to him, just as he can judge the physical things that happen to any other body: a subject without a history, without roots, ideally without emotions... This paves the way for perceiving the body as an instrument, still a form of dissociation and distance between oneself and one's body.

The distance taken by Christianity from the dualist devaluation of the bodily dimension is alive and well. Health, physical strength and care of the body are no longer marginalized. Physical expressivity, the value and meaning of emotions are recognized. In contemporary religious thought, it is perhaps less a question of restoring the body as such than of putting the person into a holistic perspective. In the biblical view of man, the flesh-spirit opposition ("the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"), and body-psyche-heart opposition, have a more existential meaning than the philosophical one given by the Greeks in opposing body and soul. Current thought on the body highlights a wide range of experiences: physical responsiveness, corporal donation, expressivity, emotional wealth and complexity, subtleness of touching, listening, looking, etc. At the same time, current religious thought regarding the body is reticent to view it as an instrument, something like treating an object.<sup>36</sup> Faced with the twofold

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36. In a book that introduces the process involved in a positive view of the body, Xavier Thévenot writes, for example: "Body and spirit are not two substances; there is only one subject, a carnal subject of which the body is the site, form and venue, and the spirit is – or

statement: "I am my body", "I have a body", the growing predilection for the former makes us reluctant to use our bodies, to treat them as instruments, be it in a context of work, pleasure, danger in the form of "extreme sports" or superhuman performances. The corporal aspect is not repulsive to the Catholic religious sphere, unlike some spiritual paths that treat the body as an enemy or a slave, or that hope to escape the physical dimension by fading into a huge impersonal whole.

The most tangible sign of withdrawing from a certain deprecatory dualism where the body is concerned might lie in the willingness to welcome hearing about the analogy between human love and God's love for humankind. This analogy, significantly developed by the Old Testament prophets, found its poetic expression in the Song of Songs. Further, they went as far as to say that the expression "everything is grace" is equivalent to the analogy "everything is wedding", often underlined by certain mystics.

If there is a continuity in the corporal dimension towards the profoundest self, it is easy to understand the instinct of a religious echo found in caring for others, particularly children, as briefly referred to by Christian Bobin:

"Like in the Bible, the young women of Palestine, yesterday, now: they raise God out of the dust of time, the old everyday gold. They wash his head, rock him with songs, wrap him in white linen. They feed him with rye and wine."<sup>37</sup> [Translation]

Cultivating a dualist, pessimistic perception of the body goes against a rejuvenated interpretation of sexuality and human love. Michel and Christiane Barlow recently published an essay closely based on their own experience: *Le Couple, chemin vers Dieu* (Paris, DDB, 1995). They did not write: marriage, a path leading to God. In discussing these issues, they also included unmarried and newly constructed couples. At the same time, it is, no doubt, because the human experience of love is one of the most central paths leading to the religious experience that the sacrament of marriage exists. In this context, sexual morality seeks to define itself and evolves. Maurice Bellet explains the rejuvenated horizon by exploring the pathway of the art of loving, art in the real sense, like in the art of living:

"What happens when art is chosen as the dominant reference for morality? I am careful to say dominant and first, and not only arriving in an existing moral code with its own nuances. Can we radically espouse this view? This represents a notable change: morality is, above all, the art of living; with art, it shares a love of

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may be – the dynamism, breath, original life." [Translation] *Le Corps de l'esprit*, Paris, Cerf, 1999, p. 12.

37. *La Part manquante*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, coll. Folio, p. 16.

creation, freedom, the desire to work, to communicate, the meaning of maturation and trial, the presence of the body and matter and based on what they are – painting or dance -- spirit and matter, and one through the other.

And if, as the Gospel proclaims, we state that all life is love, then morality is the art of loving. And, since love can stray, it is art of loving well, loving in truth. And still further, since love is never solitary, to the principle of morality is given openness to love, which– most importantly – presupposes that initially love is given to man. [...]

Law as a reference is essentially judicial in nature, judging the act. It may "take account of" the subject's situation, history, circumstances, etc. But it is the act that is its object. So-and-so did or did not do such-and-such a thing. However, with regard to morality, via the act, it is man that is judged. Legal reference tends to categorize people.

Art as a reference, interested as it is in work, is directed at genesis. It is the way that is of prime importance. Whether it has been difficult, or taken a long time, everything can be understood as long as there has been a specific path.

And, both the path and the work are so unique that judgement is not possible – at least not judgement directed at the act and categorizing the actor. The product, too, is unique: it is not appreciated according to a code and we cannot know ahead of time when and how it will come about. So, the art reference requires that non-judgement be practised among men."<sup>38</sup> [Translation]

Here too, there is a burgeoning of contemporary religious thought and renewal. Above and beyond humanist thinking that sees the body as neither an instrument nor an object, the Catholic sensitivity suggests the presence of an aura of dignity, transparency or "sacramentality" bordering on an intuition of the love between God and humankind. It is much closer to an ethos of personal integration and search for a "good life" than an ethos based on inculcating rules.

## 2.10 A preferential option for the poor

At income tax time, just as national TV virtually praised an Albertan who had not paid taxes for 25 years, the Catholic news magazine *Présence*, of Montréal, published an editorial on the soundness of not cheating on taxes (March 2000). This was a dominant theme in creating human solidarity. In another vein, in the schools, the goodwill solicited to help disaster victims,

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38. The other reference: ethics as the art of loving, in *Le Supplément, revue d'éthique et de théologie morale*, No. 180, March 1992, p. 24-26.

the homeless, the blind kindles enormous active sympathy. By shifting its prime emphasis from the personal to the social, the contemporary ethos gives value, once again, to early, profound sources.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council and the Church's sweeping internal debates,<sup>39</sup> after thirty years, the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and the Gospels has led to the increasingly clear conviction widely promoted by religious authorities as to the importance of a preferential option for the poor. This option is seen as stemming directly from the Gospel message and Jesus' practice. It has given birth to a movement of thought and commitment that is one of the most dynamic of the modern era, promoting society's transformation into one that is more just and shows greater solidarity towards people and populations who are poor, rejected and excluded.

Political discernment, criticism of a certain economism and the social practices of many Christians were largely based on this movement, which diverged from something of a charitable tradition referred to in some of Jacques Brel's sarcastic songs. Less and less, the fight against poverty takes the form of donations that give the donor a sense of satisfaction. More and more, it occurs under the banner of the imperatives of justice. The Québec movement that most explicitly propagates this logic is, in fact, called *Justice et foi (Justice and Faith)*.<sup>40</sup> Recent pressure to eliminate the debts of Third World countries constitutes, on a world scale, one of the most obvious modern-day applications in favour of the poor. Theologically speaking, this conviction echoes a discerning analysis in established structures of complicities with evil, complicities that lead us to talk about "sin structures" and warrant being fought with perseverance and effectiveness.

Clearly, we must be aware of what the preferential option for the poor is not. In no way does it constitute propaganda promoting partisan political orders issued by a religious authority. Nor is it a by-product of the faith experience moving towards a universalist ethos detached from faith. In other words, it does not consist in hiding the transcendent aspect of religion in order to exalt an immanence of commitment in historical causes. On the contrary, it is rooted in a profound spiritual experience: an encounter with a God who does not look at people's merits or status, who sees them as equals in dignity simply because he loves them as a Father loves his children, and who identifies with human suffering, particularly that of the powerless abused by the powerful.

Briefly, there is a strong affinity between education and a preferential option for the poor. A teacher's work could quite conceivably be

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39. The Synod held in 1968 in Medellín for Latin America had the sustainable impact that Gregory Baum explains in: *Essays in Critical Theology*, Kansas City, Sheed and Ward, 1994. See particularly chapters 1 and 9.

40. The Montréal magazine *Relations* very carefully echoes its analyses and commitments.

completely void of social commitment. He or she could perform his job strictly for the wages, as a one-for-one exchange, and be guided strictly by fairness in terms of academic success or failure. From this perspective, schools are just as ruthless as society as a whole. There even exists a scholarly discourse imparting a status of fate, a scientifically inevitable character, to schools that are accomplices, serving the interests of the dominant classes.

Concern for the most destitute can, however, have a place in education: in an awareness of the role of economic and social factors in academic success or failure, not making a fetish of these factors, but taking them into consideration and devoting a bit more attention, imagination and perseverance than is strictly just, in maintaining the conviction in universal responsiveness to learning opportunities... Is it possible to have more faith in teenagers than they do in themselves and the adults they rub shoulders with? In this respect, ideologies are less encouraging than hope, pure and simple.

Philippe Meyrieu recently commented on an educational novel,<sup>41</sup> *Le Sagouin*, by François Mauriac, published in 1951, in which the novelist recounts a teacher's bitter regret at having failed to seize the opportunity to help an unfortunate child. Denied assistance, the child committed suicide. Attention to children at risk, persistence in giving problem students confidence in their own means, genuinely represent a preferential choice for the poor in the school context. Such attitudes can predispose the students themselves to choose to have their lives revolve around such an option.

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41. *Des enfants et des hommes. Littérature et pédagogie, vol. 1 : La promesse de grandir*, Paris, ESF, 1999, p. 9-11. English-language literature is also replete with piercing writings on relations at school: See Pat Conroy's *The Water is Wide* or Roddy Doyle's, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*.



## **CONCLUSION: PROVIDING A CREDIBLE INTRODUCTION**

The role of religious education in the schools is not one of theological development, but more one of mediation. It is not one of an authorized religious guide, as such, within a faith community. It is something of a relay from adult to child or adolescent. The main difference between it and the parent-child relationship stems from the institutional, methodical, collective and structured nature of all schooling. While in a faith community, the religious guide addresses children in the context of a mission of proclamation, or calling of the faith ("catechesis"), in the schools the teacher's action is based more on **service** than mission, tending to explain the world of faith and explore it, instead of calling the students to enter into it.

Nevertheless, it would be inadvisable to confine religious education in the schools to doctrine and ethics, leaving the spiritual and community dimensions to the faith community. In its own way, religious education in the school context deals with a world of overall meaning that includes these different aspects.

Religious education is called confessional when this introduction occurs in the context of a particular religion, unlike instruction applying history, sociology and psychology to the religious phenomenon as a whole. In the first case, teaching is based on a living religious culture. In the second, it is based on the social sciences.

This religious culture is solidly situated in time, in a long chain of listening, interpretation, linking up life experience and a calling from elsewhere. The time devoted to religious education in the classroom is time where attention is directed primarily at experiencing, listening, talking. The teacher is less the one to "lay down the law" than ever before. To cite Clare Richards' lovely metaphor, the teachers are **part of the circle**: with and like the others, they find, collect and reformulate meaning that they do not invent, and guide their students in this process.

The new emphases, both pedagogical and thematic, entailed in the curriculum reform recently announced, should not diminish the confidence with which we can assume the responsibility for religious education. On the contrary, they help make it more stimulating, more open, more meaningful for the students, more attuned to the major challenges of today's world.

A great Québec poet, Félix Leclerc, incorporated into the lyrics of a song the prayer of Francis of Assisi, who, in the 12th-century knew how to be thankful for the water, the earth, the air, the sun and the moon, in an era that gave birth to courtly love. The cultural roots that the introduction to the world of Catholicism in the schools relays are deep and fertile. In them, the environment, democratic citizenship, appeal to intelligence, development of active individuals able to exercise autonomy, and collective solidarity can find support and resources. We must tackle affinities and convergences. Both speak eloquently of the present and cross-generational dynamism of a widespread questioning that marks our times.

## APPENDIX 1

### From a shared reading, bridges for action

To put this document into practice – with elementary school cycle teams, groups of teachers, secondary school teams of specialists, workshops with school administrations, education consultants – the following questions may be useful guidelines.

1. Are there one or more convergences between religious education and the new emphases in the curriculum due to the current reform with which one of us has an affinity in order to help others?
  - Citizenship (ethics, commitment ...)
  - Environment (creation, scientific knowledge ...)
  - Health (meaning of body...)
  - Expressive skills (stories...)
  - Consumer habits (ethics and search for happiness...)
  - Constant concern for intellectual skills...Etc.
2. What role can a preference for teaching by project play in religious education?
3. Between the extreme of inner conscience and that of commitment, the ethos of non-violence, priority attention to the poor and unfortunate, can our teaching find a happy medium, a balance? If not, how can we try to improve it?
4. Do the students harbour misconceptions (media legacies, fate, group stereotypes) that must be eliminated before an objective understanding can be reached?
5. Which Bible stories are most closely associated with inner awareness? Or, more particularly, ethical awareness?
6. What support for religious education in the schools can come from the family and the faith community? Given the fact that students' attachment to their parents is not the same as to the faith community, can we encourage parents to act as enlightened, interested accompanying persons in young people's learning process? In the spirit of a school open to the local community, can we encourage the faith community to provide services, cooperation, testimonies, that converge with education in the schools?
7. How can we use networks based on mutual trust to incorporate contributions by the school administration, joint efforts by the school board, decision-making responsibility on the part of the governing board and its potential to constitute a tie with the community?

8. How can the learning that occurs in the classroom converge with spiritual animation and community involvement? Is it possible to envisage meaningful joint efforts?

## APPENDIX 2

### Short annotated bibliography

From among many relevant, enriching written sources, the following may be particularly useful in giving more detail on various aspects of religious deliberation that is reinvested in teaching and education.

- BOUDREAU, Spencer, *Catholic Education : The Quebec Experience*, Detselig Enterprises Ltd, Calgary, Alberta, 1999.
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