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### Éthique, culture religieuse, dialogue: arguments pour un programme [Ethics, religious culture, dialogue: arguments for a programme]

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and often does what it does extremely well. In this light, I feel confident in saying that anyone generally interested in the issues with which this journal is concerned should find substantial food for thought in this work—and I commend it accordingly.

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**Éthique, culture religieuse, dialogue: arguments pour un programme  
[Ethics, religious culture, dialogue: arguments for a programme]**

Georges Leroux, 2007

Montréal, Fides

\$9.95 (pbk), 120 pp.

ISBN 9-782-76212789-8

In the late 1990s, the Quebec government launched the Proulx commission whose mandate was to consider the place of religion on the curriculum of the province's newly secularised school system. The result of the commission's deliberations was a proposal for the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) programme. The ERC course has been a statutory requirement at all levels and for all students in the jurisdiction since September 2008.

Georges Leroux, a philosophy professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal and longstanding programme consultant, aims in this book to explain the ERC programme and to defend its adoption by the Quebec government. Intended for a general educated readership, the book's two substantive chapters present, in turn, an historical account of Quebec's secularisation and pluralisation process and an argument that the ERC programme of moral education is a judicious response on the part of society to the social and political challenges facing Quebec going forward.

In line with international trends, the ERC programme assumes a competency-based framework. Its documentation lists three core competencies: (1) to reflect on ethical questions, (2) to demonstrate an understanding of the phenomenon of religion and (3) to practise dialogue. According to Leroux, the most compelling rationale for the programme is what he calls 'the political argument' (pp. 79, 84), a rich and complex set of considerations that is not easily condensed. Leroux suggests that the strategy employed by the great modern republics (the USA and France) to reproduce themselves across decades and centuries has been to use the education system to instil

into each new generation a largely unitary ideal of republican citizenship. This educational project becomes less tenable to the extent that society becomes pluralistic, Leroux argues. In times of pluralism, citizens' deepest ethical and religious commitments have the best chance of surviving as a central source of nourishment for public life when citizens understand each others' values and religious commitments and when they are practised in discussing and reflecting on them together. The substantive outcome of this process of dialogue is, of course, impossible to predict. The ERC provides a procedural certainty by operating at once as a public forum for this process of dialogue and by helping children develop dialogic skills that they will carry with them into adulthood.

The second competency, namely demonstrating an understanding of the phenomenon of religion, supports the dialogue competency. Phrased so as not to suggest that it is meant to encourage spirituality or religious experience, the religious culture aspect aims to foster understanding between co-citizens who share no religious affiliation. A further benefit of this religious teaching, as Leroux sees it, is that it participates in the development of children's identities as members of a religious community. In the ERC programme, Leroux writes, 'each child is invited to turn towards his own history and to integrate it with that of others' (p. 85).

Leroux presents the first competency, to reflect on ethical questions, as serving two purposes. One, a staple of progressivist conceptions of moral education, is to enable young people to rationally reflect on ethical issues as a means to helping them negotiate the kaleidoscope of competing conceptions of the good life abroad in modern, liberal societies. The other, only partially distinguishable from the dialogue competency it seems, is to engage young people with the problems of managing collective life as ethical problems—the distribution of wealth, responsibility for the natural environment, equity in access to public services and so on.

Just how uncritically the book treats the ERC programme is arresting. There is, however, no shortage of public opposition in Quebec to the programme—a recent demonstration in the city of Drummondville, for instance, attracted several thousand demanding the right of parents to withdraw their children from the course. In these circumstances and for the purposes of this book, it is perfectly understandable that Leroux might want to wear his commissioner's hat. But there are objectionable aspects of the programme and objections to Leroux's defence of it.

The historical reconstruction of Quebec's process of pluralisation reads at times like a case study in Ernest Renan's idea that 'historical error is an essential element in the creation of a nation'. Most notably, Leroux's narrative too easily capitulates to the assumption that cultural heterogeneity is something new in the Americas. A more truthful story would take cultural pluralism as an enduring political fact in North America and relate how and why its societies have come to accommodate, accept and even encourage pluralism rather than denying and repressing it.

It is also odd how the ERC programme, which started out as a plan to include religious instruction on the national curriculum, ends by being conceived essentially as a form of citizenship education and an instrument of civic integration. As a means to this end, I am sceptical about a programme with such a strong mandate to dwell on

differences. This approach threatens to normalise difference and what we should want is just the opposite. Through the process of denormalisation, cultural particularities are gradually overshadowed by the shared features of human experience that should be most salient to the wise management of public affairs.

Finally, the specific place that Leroux suggests the ERC programme assigns to religion in personal identity seems overtheorised, and this in two respects. First, the programme seeks to cultivate intercultural dialogue and understanding through the examination of religious beliefs, symbols and practices. Even for those who identify strongly with their religious commitments, however, religion is but one aspect of culture and identity. The cause of understanding, say, Mohawk culture (the Mohawks were largely converted to Christianity from the seventeenth century) will be advanced precious little by understanding the religion that many Mohawks practice. Second, the standard references in the psychology of identity development hold that adolescence is the period of life where religion emerges a perspicuous aspect of a person's self concept—and that, for some people, religion never becomes central to identity at all. Ask a boy of eight who he is and he will tell you about his friends, his pets, his favourite toys and games, where he lives, and maybe where his family is going on holiday. This raises the worrying prospect that the ERC programme will put a great deal of pressure on very young children to pick a religion with which to identify. Small wonder that it has won the endorsement of Quebec's major religious groups. They get a steady stream of direct-to-consumer advertising in every school in the province, paid for by the state.

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### **Inspiring faith in schools: studies in religious education**

Marius Felderhof, Penny Thompson and David Torevell (Eds), 2007

Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing

£55.00 (hbk), 199 pp.

ISBN 978-0-7546-6031-6

*Inspiring faith in schools: studies in religious education* is an engaging, timely and impressive riposte to an increasingly secularised vision of religion and education.

As the publishers accurately state, the book 'addresses the privileging of secularism that affects RE in countries influenced by modern western thought'. The result of a