

# LIVING TOGETHER WITH DIFFERENCES: QUEBEC'S NEW ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE PROGRAM

NOWADAYS IT IS GENERALLY agreed that education plays a vital role in learning to live together through the progressive discovery of others, their culture and spirituality, and through involvement in common projects. The renewed curriculum in Québec follows this general tendency, since such learning is at the very heart of the aims targeted by the new *Québec Education Program*.

It first aims to enrich students' world-views by encouraging them to look "critically at themselves and their actions, opinions, and values," emphasizing that it "is important for all members of the school community to be on the lookout for opportunities to support students in their process of reflection, which contributes to the formation and expression of their world-view." Its second aim, which focuses on the construction of students' personal, social and cultural identity, raises the issue of the autonomy of the individual in relation to the community. It claims that "the possibility of expressing their opinions, making choices, and learning to justify them and assess their consequences helps students develop their autonomy" and that "contact with ethnic and cultural diversity can make them realize that they are part of a community and help them to take their place in that community while affirming their own values in a spirit of respect for differences." Students learn to express their perceptions, feelings, and ideas and recognize how other people's opinions can influence their own reactions. This second aim also supports "encouraging them to take positions on major social issues and providing them with the opportunity to reflect on the moral and spiritual tenets of their community." The third aim promoted by the new curriculum is student empowerment. "Knowing what action to take in response to the complexity of current issues or how to confront major ethical and existential questions gives young people power over their lives."<sup>1</sup>

These aims reinforce the vision of the *Québec Education Program* as an education for living together with differences. The education that young Quebecers receive is intended to involve them in a process of reflection and questioning, not only with respect to their own world-views, their values and those of others, but also with respect to the major

issues of living together in Québec society.

The implementation of the new Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program further pursues this vision by providing a unique opportunity for young Quebecers to learn to live together with differences. Indeed, by defining its goals as the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good, the program seeks to develop students' competency to engage in dialogue about ethical and religious issues in order to better understand the different representations (particularly religious) that people have of the world and of humanity, as well as the different ways of living a moral life and promoting harmonious social relations within the community.<sup>2</sup>

## RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR CONCERNS

This ERC, which was established by Bill 95 and replaces courses on religious (Catholic and Protestant) education and moral education, reflects the will of the population as expressed in prior consultations and in hearings during the Parliamentary Commission on Education during the spring of 2005.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it has been greeted with some controversy.

On one side of the debate, some Christians denounce what they refer to as the "outright secularism" and "relativism" of the program and call for its removal, basing their arguments on the principle of parental choice in matters concerning the education of their children. On the other side, secularists hold that grouping ethics, religious culture, and secular world-views in a single course necessarily involves dealing with moral issues from a religious perspective.

According to the MELS (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport), at the start of the 2008 school year, about 1,300 parents (out of a total of about one million students) requested an exemption from the ERC course for their children,<sup>4</sup> arguing in some cases that the course "made a mockery of the Catholic religion" [translation].<sup>5</sup> Despite extensive media coverage of pressure groups agitating for the removal of this mandatory course, only 72 students throughout the province actually withdrew from it. The MELS position has been to refuse all requests for exemption at either the elementary or the secondary level.<sup>6</sup>

For its part, the Coalition pour la liberté en éducation (CLÉ) (Coalition for Freedom in Education) argues that "parents should be able to choose an education along denominational lines, under the supervision of 'competent religious authorities,' who could be either Christian, Muslim or Jewish" [translation]. The CLÉ is demanding that the Québec government guarantee this freedom of choice by, among other things: "reinstating in article 41 of the *Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* a clause to the effect that academic programs must respect the beliefs and convictions of parents with children in educational institutions;

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**EN BREF** Le nouveau programme d'éthique et de culture religieuse (ÉCR) du Québec vise à développer chez les élèves la capacité de s'engager dans un dialogue portant sur des questions éthiques et religieuses afin de mieux comprendre les différentes représentations du monde et de l'humanité, ainsi que les différentes façons de vivre moralement et de favoriser des relations sociales harmonieuses dans la collectivité. Ses partisans soutiennent que l'étude de l'éthique et des perspectives du monde se complètent et s'informent mutuellement. Mais le programme attire les foudres des milieux chrétiens et laïcs. Certains Chrétiens dénoncent sa « laïcité » et son « relativisme » et exigent son retrait ; alors que selon des laïcs, comme l'éthique, la culture religieuse et les perspectives laïques sont regroupées dans un seul cours, les questions morales seront nécessairement traitées selon une perspective religieuse.



adding article 41 to the list of articles for which no derogation can be obtained, by virtue of article 52 of the Charter; modifying Bill 95 in order to give back to parents their freedom to choose between moral and religious instruction for their children in school, in line with their beliefs and convictions ..."[translation]<sup>7</sup>

Among those Christians who oppose the ERC course is Cardinal Marc Ouellet who, during the debates on reasonable accommodations in the fall of 2007 (Bouchard-Taylor Commission) and more recently in an article in *Vita e Pensiero*, firmly expressed his objections: "It would be extremely naïve to believe that a cultural approach to the teaching of religions will produce new little Quebecers who are pluralists, experts in inter-religious relations and impartially critical towards all beliefs. The least that can be said is that the thirst for spiritual values will hardly be quenched and the tyranny of relativism will render the transmission of our religious heritage even more difficult....This law does not serve the common good and its imposition will be perceived as a violation of citizens' religious liberties. It would be unreasonable to retain it as it was originally decreed, because it would lead to a strict secular legalism that would exclude religion from the public sphere" [translation].<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops (AQCB) is *not* opposed to the ERC course. In a letter to the Minister of Education, March 11, 2008, the AQCB "acknowledges there are many considerable advantages in the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program," but at the same time insists that there are "a certain number of limitations and difficulties that are quite inherent in the nature of the ERC program. However, we feel that some of these can be avoided."<sup>9</sup>

Both Loyola High School in Montreal and a couple from Drummondville (a municipality in Central Québec) have challenged Bill 95 in court. When these judgments come down, they will constitute an interesting test of legality. They may either confirm the course's legitimacy, require the MELS to readjust the program to respond to new requirements that could emerge, or invalidate it. Whatever the result, a return to the old regime of opting between denominational (Catholic or Protestant) instruction and moral instruction is highly unlikely, since this system of options infringed upon the right to equality<sup>10</sup> and also because a large majority of Quebecers do not want public schools to dispense religious instruction. If we accept the results of the Léger Marketing survey published in the daily newspaper *Le Devoir* on September 16, 2008, only 16 percent of Quebecers are in favour of religious instruction in schools.<sup>11</sup>

While those who support a return to denominational schooling denounce the stand taken in favour of strict secularism, secular groups oppose the ERC course because

they fear that ethical issues will end up being addressed from the perspective of a particular religion. They are concerned that combining ethics and religious culture in the same course will simply perpetuate the existing confusion between the respective domains of ethics and religion. According to *Mouvement laïque québécois (MLQ)* (Québec Secular Movement), combining ethics and religious culture in one and the same program implies "preserving religion's stronghold over moral education, ethics and civics education. Amalgamating ethics and religious culture in a single course will inevitably lead schools to deal with moral questions from a religious perspective" [translation].<sup>12</sup> MLQ also claims that the integration of culture and religion "suggests that ethical behaviour cannot be developed unless it is tied to a religious belief and that a person who has no religion is necessarily amoral or immoral" [translation].<sup>13</sup>

The MLQ has petitioned the Minister of Education "to remove the religious culture component from the new program entitled 'Ethics and Religious Culture'; to create a single course in 'Ethics and the Practice of Dialogue', which would be open to the entire student population; and to provide an optional course in religious studies in Secondary Cycle Two only" [translation].<sup>14</sup>

#### ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE: CAN THEY BE RECONCILED?

Despite concerns expressed from both religious and secular perspectives, the idea of a single course integrating the study of ethics and religious culture seems imminently reasonable if our goal is to teach young people to live together with differences. While it is true that attempts to derive so-called 'natural morality' from what were essentially religious premises have in the past blurred those lines, there would be nothing gained by addressing ethics and religious culture as discrete and isolated domains. That said, it is important to distinguish between the moral systems themselves, as expressed by both religious and secular traditions, and the goals of ethics education.

It is crucial for the study of ethics and world-views to inform each other. An education in ethics would be incomplete if it were cut off from the study of expressions of meaning and ways of living associated with religious experience. Similarly, an education in religious culture would remain incomplete if it were restricted to the study of cultural phenomena as separate from a more comprehensive ethical perspective.

Finally, even if instruction in ethics and instruction in religious culture can be conceived independently of each other, combining them in a single program coordinates the major preoccupations of both perspectives, neither one of which can, on its own, address either questions of meaning or questions of coexistence. Neither one of these questions belongs exclusively to the domain of ethics or the domain of religious culture. On the contrary, both ethics and religious culture are concerned with issues of meaning and of coexistence. An education in living together with differences aims to develop students' capacity to examine their convictions intelligently ('*l'intelligence des convictions*') as well as to promote their "commitment to harmonious coexistence in society" [translation].<sup>15</sup> In this respect, to conceive of ethics and religious culture as intimately linked is both an innovative approach and a wise choice.

In its orientation document, MELS makes its objectives clear: "It is pedagogically desirable to facilitate students' understanding of the world by not putting up barriers between worlds that, although specific, may be complementary."<sup>16</sup> We need "to work together for students, enriching the students' general culture, allowing them to open up to others with tolerance and respect, equipping them to act responsibly toward themselves and others, and teaching them to live together in a democratic Québec that is open to the world."<sup>17</sup> This kind of learning is essential for society, because it prepares students to live in a pluralist and open society by developing their capacity to act responsibly toward themselves and others, by adopting attitudes of respect and tolerance for others and their convictions, and especially by developing "a sense of civic responsibility when expressing one's convictions and values, and becoming aware that individual choices affect the community."<sup>18</sup>

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#### Notes

- All quotes from Ministère de l'éducation, du loisir et du sport, MELS. *Québec Education Program. Secondary School Education, Cycle One* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2004), 6.
- For a full description of the new course, see [https://www7.mels.gouv.qc.ca/DC/ECR/index\\_en.php](https://www7.mels.gouv.qc.ca/DC/ECR/index_en.php) (14.10.2008)
- See <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fra/37legislature1/commissions/Ce/index.shtml> (14.10.2008)
- Le Soleil*, 17 October 2008.
- L. Leduc. « Le programme d'éthique et culture religieuse lancé dans la controverse », *La Presse/Cyberpresse*, 2008. See [www.cyberpresse.ca](http://www.cyberpresse.ca) (14.10.2008)
- Ibid.*
- See [www.coalition-cle.org](http://www.coalition-cle.org) (14.10.2008)
- M. Ouellet, « Où va le Québec? A propos de la foi et de la laïcité », *Vita e Pensiero*, 3, 2008.
- See < [www.eveques.qc.ca](http://www.eveques.qc.ca) > (14.10.2008)
- See the Proulx Report: "Religion in Secular Schools : A New Perspective for Québec" (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1999), <http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/REFORME/religion/Abre-an.pdf> (14.10.2008)
- See <http://www.ledevoir.com/2008/09/16/205766.html> (14.10.2008)
- Daniel Baril, « Pourquoi un cours de culture religieuse? », *Le Devoir*, 6 July 2005.
- M.-M. Poisson, H. Laberge and D. Baril, MLQ press conference, 24 April 2008. See [www.mlq.qc.ca](http://www.mlq.qc.ca) (14.10.2008)
- See [www.mlq.qc.ca](http://www.mlq.qc.ca) (14.10.2008)
- N. Bouchard et J. Pierre (coll.), *Éthique et culture religieuse à l'école* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2006).
- MELS, *Establishment of an Ethics and Religious Culture Program. Providing Future Direction for all Québec Youth* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2005), 5.
- Ibid.*, 12.
- Ibid.*, 6.



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