

# Study of Religions For Citizenship: Why Not?

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«A peculiarity of our age,» Stephen Carter (2000, p. 190) insightfully observes in his book, *In the Name of God*, «is that we proclaim our respect for diversity except when the diversity is religious.» It seems no less a peculiarity of Canada, a country with deep religious beginnings, that about 90% of students in its public schools finish their secondary education without being required to study religion. This should prove disturbing for those who are concerned with raising the quality of citizenship in culturally diverse democratic societies. Given that the culture of a people is shaped by their religion and that good citizenship requires an understanding of society and its institutions, the absence of religion in the public school curriculum is not only a peculiarity but also a glaring omission on the part of educators.

Thus far, there has been little concern in Canada about the lack of study of religion in public schools. Though litigation involving religious instruction and religious exercises in Ontario, British Columbia and Manitoba attracted some degree of attention, there was little outcry about the ensuing court decisions which found them unconstitutional, and nothing perceptible transpired to reflect any real popular desire to carve a secure place for religion in the public school curriculum. Worse, it was business as usual for educators. It was clear that, to them, the virtual elimination of religion in public school systems was of little or no consequence at all.

Yet, it should not take much reflection for educators – particularly those concerned with citizenship education – to realize that the study of religion matters and that schools are missing an important curricular component which can provide an indispensable contribution toward the development of informed and responsible citizens. The September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Centre is a chilling reminder of the tasks ahead for educators: while provoked by the terrorists, the many subsequent instances of violent, prejudiced treatment of Muslims and those who looked like them, both in Canada and the United States, were nonetheless reprehensible acts and demonstrated a failure of schools to cultivate tolerant and enlightened citizens.

**The Cultural Context of Canadian Citizenship**

The democratic way of life we take for granted in Canada requires that we respect the rights of all persons and treat them with justice, irrespective, particularly, of their race, ethnicity, or religion. As Stephen Macedo points out in his book *Liberal Virtues* (1990, pp.266-267), it requires not only the attitudes of tolerance and sympathy for those who differ and disagree but also the capacity to reason and act from an impersonal standpoint in a pluralistic social milieu. Beyond these liberal, individualistic virtues, it calls for communal virtues involving the predisposition and ability to reflect upon human experiences, values, and ways of life in an effort to promote meaningful human interaction and the flourishing of human life (Brian Stiltner, 1999, p. 105).

Needless to say, these attitudes, predispositions and abilities are dependent on the possession of knowledge and understanding related to the cultural context within which citizenship rights and obligations are exercised in interaction with others. As everyone knows, that context for Canadian citizens is marked by cultural diversity. What is often not recognized, or acknowledged, is that that context has had religious history and character.

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Christopher Dawson's works on culture and religion (e.g., *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, 1960; *Religion and Culture*, 1948; *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 1950) have demonstrated that «Throughout the greater part of mankind's history, in all ages and states of society, religion has been the great central unifying force in culture» and that «from the beginning the social way of life which is culture has been deliberately ordered and directed in accordance with the higher laws of life which are religion.» Indeed, throughout history, religion has functioned as conservator and creator. Cultural achievements have religious beliefs that lie behind them; outstanding creative works are due to religious inspiration or a religious end; great literatures have religious themes; and the institutions of family, marriage, and kinship have a religious background and have been maintained with religious sanctions. Thus, Dawson (1948, pp. 49-50) insists that «we cannot understand the inner form of a society unless we understand its religion» (1948, pp. 49-50). While secularization has been a dominant force in contemporary societies, it is a relatively modern phenomenon and, perhaps, an anomalous one. Rightly or wrongly, religious sympathizers have recently been given some reason to dream of religious renaissance by Reginald Bibby (2002), who has observed that religious groups may expect rebirth and renewal under appropriate circumstances.

Renaissance or not, the reality and history of Canadian culture are similar to those of other western societies and have been amply documented. Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin's volume, *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (1996. Also, J. W. Grant, 1988), which traces the evolution of the major Christian denominations in Canada over several centuries, highlights the experiences of the churches and the profound impact that Christianity has had on both French- and English-Canadian societies and cultures. However, reflecting the reality in most western countries with religious beginnings, the volume concludes that the concept of 'Christendom' , a society where Christianity and culture are essentially integrated, is gone forever in the country. This conclusion is shared by John Webster Grant (1988), who notes the tremendous role that religion has played in the life of the country, but nevertheless views the religious prospect as an ambiguous one. He detects some promise in the increasing outspokenness of religious leaders and assemblies on social and economic issues, as well as in the growing prominence of conservative evangelicals and charismatics within and beyond the traditional churches. However, he feels that «the noise of things that are dying still drowns out the voice of the things that are coming to birth» (p. 245).

The demise of 'Christendom' in Canada does not mean, however, that the religious factor is gone. Terrence Murphy (in Murphy & Perin, 1996, p. 369) sees that the defining reality of contemporary Canadian society is pluralism, which includes religious diversity. Indeed, while Protestant and Catholic churches remain the two largest categories of religious denominations in the country, membership in all of the largest Protestant denominations has declined. In contrast, the categories of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs have made significant membership between 1981 and 1991. Each more than doubled, and some tripled, their membership. As Wsevolod Isajiw (1999, p. 61) notes, this reflects the substantial immigration of people from the countries in which these religions predominate. It is only to be expected that the arrival of peoples of different cultural backgrounds should bring religious diversity to the country.

**Religious Presence in the Public Square?**

The increasing religious diversity that characterizes Canada's cultural mosaic makes it imperative that institutions in the country, particularly its educational systems, promote religious literacy. As Will Kymlicka (in Lois Sweet, 1997, p. 246) puts it, «Liberal citizens must justify their political demands in terms that fellow citizens can understand and accept as consistent with their status as free and equal citizens. It requires a conscientious effort to distinguish those beliefs which are matters of private faith from those which are capable of public defense, and to see how issues look from the point of view of those with different religious commitments and cultural backgrounds.»

How to develop liberal citizens is, unfortunately, a problem in Canadian education. The absence of study about religions and cultures reflecting the diversity of peoples in the country fails to meet the need to promote citizens who can understand the points of view of peoples with different religious and cultural backgrounds. In Canada the development of educational systems that are intentionally designated as public and secular has fostered the view that religion has no real place in the public school and has not encouraged the inclusion of religion in the school curricu-

lum. The Appeal Court ruling in Ontario (*Canadian Civil Liberties Association v. Ontario*, 1990), which declared the Elgin Country religious education curriculum unconstitutional, is likely to have the same effect as the series of Supreme Court decisions in the United States, starting with the *McCollum v. Board of Education* case in 1948, which confirmed the doctrine of separation of church and state in the area of education. The erection of the «wall of separation» effectively discouraged attempts to provide for religion in the school curriculum, though the Court in that ruling did not intend its complete banishment. Specifically to clear up the Court's position on this matter, Justice Clark declared in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) as follows:

> …(O)ne's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

Nevertheless it was not until the early 1990s that educators in the country started the drive to include the objective study of religion in the American classrooms. Undoubtedly the spate of court litigation challenging the secular curriculum and the substantial exercise of parental choice in favour of private schools prompted the move to secure a beachhead for religion in the public schools.

The absence of any stirrings among public educators to explore a place for religion in Canadian public schools may be explained, in part, by the unspoken assumption that Canada is a secular state, and that religion has no place in any of its public institutions, including politics and education. As John Webster Grant (1988, p. 216) points out, secular developments since the 1920s, including industrialization and the provision for urban amenities, produced a new breed of Canadians oriented toward materials goods and worldly ways rather than the bible and spirituality. As he puts it, «Realization that Christendom was dead, even in Canada, dawned with surprising suddenness in the 1960s.... Despite the fact that large numbers of Canadians remain either Catholic or Protestant and affirm Christian beliefs, such as belief in God and the death and resurrection of Christ, religion has been relegated in the public mind to the private sphere in Canadian life.» Carter's (2000, p. 1) observation on the American situation may as well apply to ours: many present day citizens, including leaders in government and other public institutions, have lost track of the relationship between religion and politics. For them, the mere mention of religion and religious views in our public and political life is an offense against the separation of church and state.

It is not surprising that, professing his commitment to his Christian faith, Carter should argue that «there is nothing wrong, and much right, with the robust participation of the nation's many religious voices in debates over matters of public moment» (ibid.). For him, to condemn religious voices to silence is «a sure way to accomplish the task of alienating the religious from democracy, for it places official imprimatur on the cultural message that religion is an inferior human activity» (p. 4).

More importantly, amidst a consumerist culture concerned largely with the satisfaction of desire through market and political processes, «the religious voice is perhaps the only remaining force that can call us to something higher and better than thinking constantly about our own selves, our own wants, our own rights» (p. 5).

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Indeed, it is fair to say that to muzzle religious voices is to lose the positive contributions which religion, particularly Christianity, can contribute to the common good. Such contribution consists, among others, of (i) intellectual resources for the formulation of a public philosophy, which include well-developed views on human rights and emphasis on the role of mediating institutions; (ii) a reservoir of conditions for social harmony marked by a commitment to neighbourly love and justice; and (iii) a commitment to neglected human goods demonstrated by the critique of society on behalf of the poor (Stiltner, 1999, p. 114). Unfortunately, calling attention to the merits of the religious viewpoint and to the alienation felt by silenced voices is not likely to influence the non-believer. It is all-too-easy to argue that religion has been a negative factor in human societies, and that, therefore, it is better left alone in the private arena. Thus, assuming that the merits and the demerits of religion cancel themselves out, it is important to seek other arguments for the claim that religion is entitled to a place in the public square.

Fortunately tighter arguments on behalf of the religious presence in the public arena are available. It is possible to argue, as legal philosopher Michael Perry (1997) does, that neither citizens nor even legislators or other public officials violate the non-establishment of the religion standard by presenting arguments in public political debate. Further it can be insisted that, as a matter of political morality, it is not only permissible but also important that religious arguments be presented, so that they can be tested in public political debate. This position can be extended to claim, as Christopher Eberle (2002) does, that religious citizens may publicly support, with religious arguments, coercive laws (e.g., against abortion) even without having public or secular justification. As Eberle points out, expecting religious citizens to refrain from entering the debate with their religious arguments is gratuitously burdensome because it requires them to disobey their God and

therefore imposes a substantial burden for which no compelling rationale exists. Moreover, it is arbitrary, because there is no principled reason to restrict the public expression of religious convictions on public issues, provided that it does not have disastrous consequences for political decision making and advocacy (Eberle, 2002, p. 332). It may be argued, of course, that some form of restraint on the expression of religious viewpoint to support issues of public policy may be justified. Nonetheless, as Greenawalt (1995, p. 180) insists, the principle holds: religious convictions may not be subjected to some general or rigorous exclusion in the political sphere.

More positively, the need for expression of religious views – and expression in meaningful, significant ways – on public issues becomes clear when we are reminded that the reality and challenge of moral pluralism and socio-cultural diversity have brought about the theory of deliberative democracy (Melissa Willliams, in Kymlicka & Norman, 2000, p. 125. For extensive discussion, see J. Bowman & W. Rehg, *1997*; A. Gutmann & D. Thompson, 1996; and J. Habermas, 1996.). According to this theory, legitimate government is based on consent about the terms of social and political cooperation and arrangements reached as a result or outgrowth of reasoned exchange among citizens. As citizens, then, religious individuals and groups have a rightful place in the deliberative process. This place may rightfully be reserved and protected if Williams is correct that in this process due attention must be given to the needs and identities of marginalized groups. In the light of differential powers of different groups in society, where class, wealth and prestige are prime considerations, the voicelessness of religion in our predominantly secular society would seem to justify special effort to facilitate full participation of religious individuals or groups in public forums.

Democracy's deliberative processes would reject restraint on the expression of religious viewpoints and, instead, foster their active involvement in the public arena.

**Study of Religion in Public Schools: The Time is Now**

It is clear why possession of knowledge about religions is a necessity in a democratic society. Democracy's deliberative processes would reject restraint on the expression of religious viewpoints and, instead, foster their active involvement in the public arena. At the same time, the requirement in a democratic society to respect individuals and groups, as well as their rights and freedoms, enjoins citizens to empathize with others and to avoid prejudicial actions against them.These considerations make it imperative that citizens understand other individuals or groups, as well as their perspectives and ways. Given that such perspectives and ways have underlying religious basis, knowledge and understanding of religion, in its various forms, becomes a necessity. Further, given that the doctrine of the separation of church and state is not an established one in Canada, and that our courts have adopted the U.S. Supreme Court reasoning in *Abington v. Schempp* noted above, there is no legal barrier to the development of an objective religious curriculum in Canadian public schools. It is ironic that little or no movement to develop such a curriculum is detectable in Canada, when such a movement has made progress south of the border, where the separation doctrine used to intimidate efforts to include religion in public education.

Needless to say, the crowded public school curriculum and the probability of controversy, which any attempt to include religion in the curriculum will invite, must prove intimidating. Nonetheless, developments in some school boards in the United States show that it can be done (Haynes, 2001, pp. 5-10). In 1995 twenty-four religious advocacy groups and major educational organizations, including the American Teachers Federation, the National School Boards Association, and the American Association of School Administrators, adopted a series of consensus guidelines, the most clearly articulated of which is *Religious Liberty, Public Education, and the Future of American Democracy: A Statement of Principles* (Haynes, 2001, p. 6). On the basis of this document, as well as C. Haynes and O. Thomas's *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education* (1998), California has included in its curriculum a study of the basic tenets of the world's major religions and the role of religious beliefs in shaping American history. With the new curriculum, the contributions of religion in world history, art, music, and belief systems have been discussed and are no longer marginalized (Brophy, 2001, 12). Indeed, the succcessful implementation of the curriculum in two California school districts, the Snowline Joint Unified School District (Vondra, J. 2001, 13-19) and the Ramona Unified School District (Annicharico, 2001, 20-22) demonstrates that, even under restrictive legal constraints, teaching about religion is possible.

It is unfortunate that the well-meaning and commendable efforts of the Brotherhood of Anglican Churchmen in the early 1990s to produce a multi-faith resource material for grades 5 and 6 Ottawa pupils failed, despite a previous Ontario government announcement that religious education may be provided in grades 1 through 8 for up to 60 minutes a week, provided that no single religion is given primacy (Sweet, 1997, 219-222.). The opposition coming from the Humanist Society of Ottawa, though unfortunate, might have been the occasion for exploring whether the material produced would have survived legal scrutiny or not, and whether alternative resource material that is more inclusive and developed with blessings from concerned groups could have done it.

The odds against the development of an objective religious curriculum are great, but the need for the study of religion is now more important in pluralistic Canada than ever. It is time to try.

[34] See, for example, Alain Pelletier, "Politics and Ethnicity: Representation of Ethnic and Visible-Minority Groups in the House of Commons," Ethno-cultural Groups and Visible Minorities in Canadian Politics, Kathy Megyery, ed. Volume 7 of the Research Studies for the royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991) p. 101-160; Simard, "La representation des groupes ethnoculturels dans la région montréalise."

[35] See, for example, Black, "Representation in the Parliament of Canada"; and Political Participation Research Network.

[36] Henry Milner, "Civic Literacy in Comparative Context," Policy Matters 2.2 (2001); also, this magazine.

[37] See www.torontoyouth.com.

[38] See Philip Haid, Elder C. Marques and Jon Brown, "Re-focusing the Lens: Assessing the Challenge of Youth Involvement in Public Policy," (June 1, 1999) www.iog.ca.

[39] See Sylvia Bashevkin, Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[40] Sayers and Jetha's interviews with ethnic minority politicians point to "the permeability of Canadian parties."

[41] Daiva Stasiulis, "'Deep Diversity': Race and Ethnicity in Canadian Politics," Canadian Politics in the 1990s, 4th ed., Michael S. Whittington and Glen Williams, eds. (Peterborough: Nelson, 1995) p. 203-204.

[42] Stasiulis, p. 201.

[43] Tossutti, p. 23; See, also, Sayers and Jetha.

[44] See, for example, Anver Saloojee and Myer Siemiatycki, "Formal and Non-Formal Political Participation by Immigrants and Newcomers," Canadian Issues (April 2003) p. 42-44.

[45] Kymlicka, p. 120.

[46] See Erin Tolley, "Supplement, Substitute or Stepping Stone?: Understanding the Electoral and Non-Electoral Participation of Immigrants and Minorities" paper presented at the Sixth National Metropolis Conference, Edmonton, Alberta (March 21-24, 2003).

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[1] Respondents were divided into the following groups: sex (male, female); age (18-34, 35-50, 51 years and over); education (high school or less; some post-secondary or more); and annual household income (less than $40,000; $40,000-69,999; $70,000 or more).

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[1] Kymlicka,. Norman, (2000), in their article "Citizenship in Culturally Diverse Societies: Issues, Contexts Concepts", distinguish between "common citizenship" and democratic citizenship Kymlicka,. Norman, 2000: 10).

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