QUEBEC'S ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE PROGRAM: CONTROVERSY, CONTENT, AND ORIENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of Quebec's new Ethics and Religious Culture Program. Given the social and historical importance of the program, and given that it is often the subject of gross misrepresentations, the aim of the paper is to provide a careful and substantiated reading of the program's content and orientations.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTROVERSY

In 1995, the Quebec government began a major reform of its education system. Up until then, school boards in Quebec were divided along confessional lines, designated as either Catholic or Protestant. In 1997, school boards were deconfessionalized and divided along linguistic lines, designated as either English or French speaking. In 2005, the government announced that all confessional religious instruction would be abolished as of 2008. In the fall of 2008, the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program became compulsory for all Quebec schools, elementary and secondary, public and private (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport 2005; MELS 2008, preamble).

The implementation of the program was followed by highly publicized pockets of resistance. A group of Evangelical Christian Parents withdrew their children from the course. A High School administration decided to suspend those students who did not attend the ERC classes. The Coalition for Freedom in Education, which is supported by several conservative Christian groups, organized demonstrations, protest marches, and various public events denouncing the program (Bouchard 2009; Educaloi 2008). The President of the Association of Catholic Parents, which supports the Coalition, rejected the program for what he sees as "the imposition of multiple religions." He also criticized the ethics component of the program for its purported moral relativism (Morse-Chevrier 2009). In a similar vein, a national Canadian newspaper published an article entitled "Quebec's Creepy New Curriculum" which also accuses the program of moral relativism and claims that the teaching material for this program "openly subverts Judeo-Christian values" (Kay 2008). The Coalition for Freedom in Education and the Catholic Civil Rights League use this article to support their argument against the program.[1]

Debates over the right to be exempted from the program found their way into the courts. Loyola, a private Catholic High School, petitioned the court and won the right to be exempted from teaching the program.[2] Two Catholic parents had previously failed in their attempt to obtain the right to have their children exempted from the program.[3] They argued that the program violates their freedom of religion. Their appeal was turned down by the Quebec Court of Appeal.

Opposition to the program has not been the prerogative of religious groups alone. The President of the Quebec Lay Movement (le Mouvement laïque québécois) has called for the abolition of the program, claiming that it undermines the achievements of the Enlightenment. Here, the continued presence of religion in Quebec public schools is perceived to undermine the goal of educating rational-autonomous citizens (Poisson 2009). In 2005, the former president of the movement argued that combining ethics and religion in a single course would preserve "religion's stronghold over moral education" (Bouchard 2009). In 2006, the University of Montreal Philosopher Daniel Weinstock argued that combining religion with ethics would give the erroneous impression that ethics cannot stand on its own, independent of religion.

A study mandated by the Institute of Research on Quebec received considerable attention in the media. This study takes the position that the program replaces the quest for knowledge with the promotion of multiculturalism. Immediately after conclusions of the study were made public, a member of the government's official opposition party urged the government to abolish the program. The leader of the opposition party, while rejecting the idea that the program should be abolished, nonetheless called for a parliamentary commission on the program to determine whether the study's conclusion are founded (La Presse Canadienne 2009).

Resistance to the ERC program is not surprising given that the program marks a significant departure from confessional or faith-based approaches to religious education. Moreover, the program arrives at a time of intense public debate on the place of religion in Quebec society. Intelligent critiques of the ERC program can serve to advance this debate. For example, Weinstock's concern over the juxtaposition of ethics and religion in the same program has led to a constructive debate over the nature of the relationship between religion and ethics in a secular-pluralistic society (Begin 2008). This is a relatively young program that still needs refinement (Morris, forthcoming). Moreover, as McDonough (forthcoming) argues, some of the controversy around the program at times results from its lack of conceptual precision and clarity.

Much of the criticism to date, however, blatantly misrepresents the program, and is often permeated by inflammatory and sensationalist rhetoric. For example, the *National Post* article on Quebec's "creepy" program claims that ERC program is nothing less than "a state sanctioned left-wing religion" imbued with Quebec's "heritage-averse ideology" (Kay 2008). Here, "paganism, cults and witchcraft" allegedly have the same status as Christianity. Considering that the program emphasizes the religious heritage of Quebec, this claim grossly misrepresents the content and orientations of the program. The president of the Quebec Lay Movement asserted that the program is an "insult" to the intelligence of teachers and to the discipline of philosophy (Poisson 2009). In the Loyola court case, the judge was not content to pronounce a judgement pertaining to the legal right of the school to be exempted from the program. In an apparent attempt to colour his judgement, he added that the imposition of the ERC course is tantamount to the "totalitarianism" of the "Inquisition" (Boisvert 2010). Ironically, the ERC program teaches students to develop nuanced and substantiated points of view while being cognisant of how hasty generalizations, straw man arguments, and false analogies can undermine the kind of fruitful dialogue necessary for peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic-democratic society. Some of the attacks on the ERC program effectively reinforce the need for such a program. In the following section, I present an overview of its content and orientations.

2. CONTENT AND ORIENTATIONS:

"For human beings of today, what is most important is not learning to be the most competitive, but rather to learn to live together."[4] (Petrella 2004, 191)

"We must rid the world of evil. Now is the time to draw a line in the sand against the evil ones. Across the world and across the years, we will fight the evil ones, and we will win. You are either for us or against us." (George W. Bush, cited in Paul and Elder 2005, 3).

2.1 OBJECTIVES

The two primary objectives of the ERC program are "the recognition of others" and "the pursuit of the common good" (MELS 2008, 2). The first objective is based on the principle "that all people possess equal value and dignity." The second objective is seen as an attempt to "go beyond the satisfaction of purely personal interests." It seeks "to promote projects that favour community life and respect for democratic ideals." Here, students are encouraged "to engage in critical reflection on ethical questions (the first competency), and to understand the phenomenon of religion (the second competency), by practicing, in a spirit of openness, dialogue that is oriented toward contributing to community life" (the third competency) (MELS 2008, 1). By combining ethics and religion, the Ministry envisions a program that will "prepare students to contribute to the development of a more democratic and just society" (MELS 2006, 2).

Like all the subjects in the Quebec Education Program, ERC is a competency-based program. Here, learning is defined "as an active, ongoing process of construction of knowledge." A competency "is a set of behaviours based on the effective mobilization and use of a range of resources." Behaviours refer to capacities for using appropriate resources in the accomplishment of increasingly complex tasks. "Effective mobilisation" refers to deliberate use of intellectual skills necessary for addressing problems and tasks (MELS, 2007, 4).

2.2 THE ETHICS COMPETENCY

"Most students of moral philosophy… are disappointed by the remoteness of the subject from the practical problems they expect it to illuminate… moral philosophies are usually preoccupied with … arguing over definition(s)… or debating the merits of general theories… It is easy for students to conclude that… moral philosophy has little relevance to actual moral problems." (Rachels, cited in Maguire 2010, xiii).

In the ERC program, ethics is defined as "critically reflecting on the meaning of conduct and on the values and norms that the members of a given society or group adopt in order to guide or regulate their conduct" (MELS 2008, 1). The ethics competency, which "reflects on ethical issues," refers to the capacity to think critically about ethical questions and issues. To do ethics is to engage in an intentional process involving three capacities: 1) the ability to identify issues and analyze these issues "from an ethical point of view" (contextualizing, comparing points of view, formulating questions, examining conflicting values); 2) the ability to recognize salient points of reference; and 3) the ability to evaluate "options or possible courses of actions," and how options and actions might "foster community life" (MELS 2008, 16). Here, students reflect on the relevance of values and norms.

In this reflective process, students are challenged to go beyond the submission to unsubstantiated opinions and unexamined biases (MELS 2008, 16). They learn to describe ethical situations, what Maguire refers to as "framing the moral object" (Maguire 2010). They learn to compare, synthesize, explain and justify points of view. They are taught to differentiate different types of judgments, for example, judgments of taste from judgements of value.

The content of the ethics competency is primarily thematic. At the elementary school level, the program focuses on the following topics: "the needs of humans and other living beings," "interpersonal relationships," "demands associated with the interdependence of humans and other living beings," "demands of belonging to a group," and "individuals as members of society" (MELS 2008, 60-61). The secondary program examines the following themes: freedom, autonomy, justice, the social order, tolerance, human ambivalence, and the future of humanity. Unlike the students of moral philosophy in Rachel's quote above, learners engage with practical and real-life ethical questions and problems. Under the theme of autonomy, for example, students examine sub-themes like happiness, friendship and love. Under the theme of justice students are given the opportunity to examine life and death issues like cloning, assisted suicide, euthanasia and capital punishment.

2.2 THE DIALOGUE COMPETENCY

The development of the ethics competency is intimately tied to the dialogue competency. In fact, dialogue is considered the cornerstone of the program. Students organize their thinking, formulate arguments, clarify perspectives and substantiate points of view in conversation with others. The form of dialogue envisioned by the program involves attentive listening, openness, respect for others, attention to nuances, and a particular attention to those strategies and attitudes that hinder dialogue (e.g. hasty generalizations, personal attacks, straw man arguments, false analogies, appeals to the crowd, or appeals to prejudice and stereotypes). In developing this competency, students are increasingly able to ground and organize their thinking so as to formulate coherent and substantiated arguments (MELS 2008, 66).

The dialogue competency also includes an element of self-reflection. Students are called to reflect on the quality of their reflection as well as the quality of their dialogue. It is through this meta-reflection that learners begin to become aware of those elements that hinder dialogue (Morris 2010). To foster this competency, the intellectual climate of the classroom must be conducive to an open and free expression of ideas while at the same time enable a respectful calling into question of those ideas. The program attempts to go beyond the kinds of categorical "either-or/us versus them/you are right, I am wrong" thinking characteristic of the George Bush citation above.

In an attempt to create conditions for fruitful dialogue, the ERC program urges teachers to remain viewpoint-neutral. Teachers "are not to promote their own beliefs and points of view" and they should "maintain a critical distance" with "respect to their own convictions, values and beliefs." It is their professional responsibility to exercise "judgment imbued with objectivity and impartiality." Teachers should not share their views "to ensure against influencing students." They "use the art of questioning in order to encourage their students to think for themselves" (MELS 2008, 12).

2.3 THE RELIGION COMPETENCY

According to the authors of the program, knowledge of religious culture is necessary if we are to learn to live together in a pluralistic-democratic society. As Rondeau (2008) writes, "to promote living together in a pluralistic society, so that recognizing the other is possible, dialogue must be grounded in knowledge of the other" (81). A "knowledge deficit" about the other often means that viewpoints will be imbued with stereotypes. Such a deficit can degenerate into harmful reactionary responses.

The policy document for the ERC program refers to the importance of opening "the minds of students to the world and develop their ability to work with others while showing respect for cultural, social and religious differences." This openness and cooperative spirit "are essential for social peace" (MELS 2006, 10). The ERC program takes the position that teaching religion must be academic rather than devotional or denominational, and that no one perspective ought to be normatively preferred or imposed. The ERC program favours a form of "literacy" where

> *"instruction in religious culture promotes an understanding of the main components of religions that is built on the exploration of the socio-cultural contexts in which they take root and continue to develop. Sacred texts, beliefs, teachings, rituals, ceremonies, rules of conduct, places of worship, works of art, practices, institutions… knowledge of these aspects will enable students to grasp the many dimensions of religion… moral, political, social, historical… among others."* (MELS 2008, 1)

The program seeks to cultivate an "intelligence" or "literacy" on the significance of the religion in the lives of people. Themes at the elementary level include, for example: "family celebrations," "religious practices in the community," "religions in society and the world," "stories that have touched people." (62) Themes at the secondary level include: "Quebec's religious heritage." "key elements of religious traditions," "religious references in art and culture" (63). The religion component also includes secular representations of the world and existential questions like "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Sub-themes include "the meaning of life and death," the nature of human being," love, suffering, and happiness (MELS, 2008, 37-40, 60-63).

3. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Ethics and Religious Culture program has been an impressive undertaking. Following a vast reform of its entire education system, the Quebec government introduced the program as a required course for all schools. Not surprisingly, the far reaching implications of this decision have met a great deal of resistance. Some resistance and criticism can potentially contribute to the ongoing debate over the place of religion in Quebec schools and society. The court battles could serve to generate debate around parental rights and around the rights and responsibilities of private religious schools. Some of the more reactionary responses, however, have done little except to sensationalize the debate.

The formulation of the ethics competency as a process of doing ethics well is one of the major strengths of the program. To cultivate in learners the tools and the language that allows them to "read" moral issues thoughtfully, and to be able to substantiate points of view through dialogue is an indispensable measure of competency in moral matters. Moreover, to cultivate in learners an "intelligence" about religion, and to "mobilize resources" that will foster a capacity to understand religion and religious phenomena in its many dimensions is necessary, as the authors of the program emphasize, for co-existence in a pluralistic-secular-democratic society.

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FOOTNOTES

* For the sake of brevity, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport will be cited as MELS.

[1] A google search with the title of the article generated 3 full pages of web sites citing the article. The Wikipedia article on the ERC program uses the National Post article as one of its sources.

[2] Private religious schools can teach their own confessional program in addition to the ERC program.

[3] The judge ruled against the parents saying that the course does not violate their freedom because it does not impose any particular belief system. The judgments are available at: http://www.jugements.qc.ca.

[4] All the translations from French sources are the author's translations.