

Moral Education in Quebec Today

From the point of view of those who find in it no threat to their own educational inclinations, the historical division of Quebec's schools into Catholic and Protestant systems is either useful or inconsequential and therefore taken for granted. There has indeed for some time existed a strong latent pressure for a third element that would be "neutral". But as Tenneson points out, there are now thousands of children of all nationalities in Quebec whose identities, as members of the different religions and distinctive cultures of their homes, are seriously damaged by the neutral working assumptions of schools - that their cultures and religions exist only as exotic data in history or geography textbooks. He sketches here the development and teaching of a third option in moral education that has come about in the jointly Catholic and Protestant high school in Cowansville. In this course, students are invited to look behind the pluralistic scene of modern Canada, and to ask some fundamental questions about life.

Why have so many sects or religious groupings come from one sacred book or tradition? Why have so many sacred books been written? Why are there so many religions?

These are basic questions facing our modern, pluralistic society in defining policy for the Government's compulsory course in Moral Education, which is shortly to come into effect. Quebec's educational scene has been dominated for over 100 years by the Catholic and Protestant School Commissions set up under the British North America Act of 1867. Today these two religions are no longer the only religions represented by the students in our schools. Immigration has brought people of almost every shade of belief into our society and therefore into our schools. Whose standard of morality is to be taught?

Great tensions could easily result if any boy or girl is forced to take a course in Moral Education which is based on a religious belief with which the family is not in agreement.

Regrettably, there is no unanimity among religious teachings which would allow us to produce a course in Moral Education which will cover all faiths. The origins of Hinduism are shrouded in the mists of time. We know there are several sects such as Vishnuism, Sivaism, Jainism and Sikhism; there are several sacred books and thousands of gods and goddesses. Buddha gave the world the Noble Eight-Fold Path, but there are at least two sects - Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism - which interpret that path differently. Confucius (Kung Fu-Tzu) gave the world his Analects, but the concept of the Yin and the Yang and Taoism dominate Confucian thought today. Judaism and Christianity have a common origin in the idea of God and the Old Testament, but there are Conservative and Reformed Jews and over 200 sects of Christianity. In addition the Christians claim that the New Testament is a follow-up to the Old Testament, a claim which every Jew wholeheartedly rejects. Islam has the Koran and the tradition surrounding Mahomet, but it also has the Sh'iah and the Sunni sects which make fierce war against one another, each calling the other an infidel.

It is not impossible, with the present state of immigration, that there could be followers of every one of these beliefs here in our schools in Quebec. Put these diverse elements into the same classroom at the time of Moral Instruction and the result would be confusion. Each separate religious grouping claims in one way or another to be the ONLY way to God, and therefore to moral behaviour. We are, therefore, entitled to ask some basic questions about human experience which take us behind the religious answers, so to speak, and ask, What is the meaning of Human Life? What does it mean to be a Human Being? What is the right way for Man, or mankind, to behave?

A bitter joke: the legacy of laws

It is naive to assume that in our pluralist society our schools can continue to be dominated by the Catholic and Protestant Commissions, as seems to be required by the BNA. None of us now living was alive when that act became law. Try as hard as may we shall never understand the tensions which then gave rise to our two school commissions. However, there are three propositions which seem to be justifiable, which had their roots in the conquest of a century earlier:

The victors saw no purpose in forcing their religion on a majority of the population.

The victors wanted to make sure that their religion

and their schools were legitimate and would continue to exist.

Everybody wanted to avoid proselytizing.

For many years the French Catholics refused to have anybody but French students in their school system. In consequence Orthodox Christians and Jewish people were "invited" into the Protestant system. This was an act of grace which has led to many misunderstandings. It has also meant that the word "protestant" became discredited, having a legal meaning far removed from its religious meaning. A Jewish person under this arrangement became a "protestant", which is absurd.

Bill 101 has forced children of other religious faiths into schools run by the Catholic School Commissions. Protestants are being forced into a Catholic environment. Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are also being pushed into an alien environment. If this is part of the Divine Comedy it is a bitter joke for Quebecers. The laws of our society seem to say one thing, but the ethos of our society is saying something else. But to try to make laws which conform to our society is proving to be a very complicated process, which could lead to bitter strife and terrible misunderstandings if not to actual civil war.

A course in Cowansville

When faced with this problem in Cowansville in the Eastern Townships, the English Catholics and the English Protestants pooled their resources and ran joint schools. Massey-Vanier Regional High School opened its doors in 10,69 serving both Catholics and Protestants in the English language.

Many subjects were taught under this system without religious controversy. English and French Grammar and Literature, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Agriculture, Music, Drama, and Commercial, Technical and Vocational subjects. The committees concerned decided, quite rightly, that the religion of the teacher was of no real concern in these matters so long as they remained objective in their approach. Later on, the District of Bedford Protestant Regional School Board (an absurd title which does not do justice to the real situation) had a Director of Instructional Services who was Catholic, with excellent results.

The big problem arose concerning moral education. It was decided that every student should be involved in a "morals" programme. Accordingly, the school offers three parallel but separate courses and asks its students to choose one of them,

namely Moral and Religious Instruction (Catholic), Moral and Religious Instruction (Protestant), and Moral Instruction without religious bias.

Other schools might need to offer MRI (Jewish), MRI (Hindu), or MRI (Buddhist) and so on. In Cowansville the first two options were devised and taught in close association with priests and ministers. The third option occasioned some difficulty until it was decided that some open-ended approach to the subject was needed, and a course in ethics and elementary philosophy evolved which took a broad look at the human situation and asked, What is Man? What is the right way for mankind to behave? Is there a mystery behind human existence?

The ethics course which evolved for the older students takes a look at theories and ideas put forward by thinkers and writers over the course of human history. Mention is made of every one of these ideas in any good history text read by Grade XI students, but during the ethics class a little more detail is given than is given in the history class. Students are never questioned directly about their personal behaviour, or what they were doing last night, but are presented with a variety of answers to questions about right and wrong and invited to think their way through. Every possible facet of the subject is presented to them in the time available, so that they meet both atheistic and theistic points of view. They are also able to compare the differences between political and personal ethics.

In devising this course it was necessary to be selective, and for the sake of simplicity it was divided into four parts;

1. Ethical systems which emphasize the development of personality, such as Stoicism, Hedonism, the Golden Mean, Huxley, Nietzsche, the Existentialists, and Playboy.
2. Ethical systems which emphasize the needs and pressures of society such as Tribalism, Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Communism, and Dewey.
3. Ethical systems which come from religious inspiration such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
4. Kant's Categorical Imperative which teaches that we should not treat other people as things.

The text has been kept to an introductory or elementary level, but it opens the door into the wider reaches of the subject and can thus be unlimited in its scope to the enquiring student, and unlimited in its application by the innovative teacher.

Dimensions of moral education

The unasked and unanswered questions of the course are the ones asked at the beginning of this essay. Why have so many sects arisen from one book? Why have so many different sacred books been written? Which book and which sect is right?

One of the objects of this course is not so much to answer questions for the students but to provide them with information which will help them make their own decisions. They are taken, so to speak, behind the current pluralistic scene and encouraged to ask questions about human origins and the meaning of life. If at the end of the enquiry a student decides that he or she wants to be a certain kind of Christian, or a Muslim, or anything else, they are perfectly free to make that decision. It is a personal responsibility. The public schools of Canada have no business teaching either Catholic or Protestant Christianity alone, if there are Muslims or Jews or Hindus in their classrooms forced there by an act of law. It is permissible to present many different ideas and ask if they see any similarities, or differences.

The only thing that public schools should teach in Moral Education is respect for others and individual responsibility. That is as far as our schools should go.

Parents and religious teachers in their own environment may go further and say, "Our religion requires us to look at things in this way or that, and to respect such and such a tradition." This emphasis will vary from home to home and from religious tradition to religious tradition. It is the responsibility of the home to take the lead in this other dimension of moral education. The schools have nothing to do with that. The schools may, however, lift the horizons of students to see something else beyond their immediate environment. For this purpose a course in ethics or elementary philosophy should be included in the curriculum of every high school.



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