

GEORGES LEROUX. *Différence et liberté : enjeux actuels de l'éducation au pluralisme*. Montreal, QC: Boréal. (2016). 356 pp. \$32.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-2-7646-2430-2)

Québec's mandatory ethics and religions curriculum is nothing if not complex. Teaching about religions in public schools is controversial enough at the best of times. When the Quebec government embarked on the development of this curriculum, however, it faced two additional obstacles that are unique to the social context of contemporary Quebec: opposition from a combative and openly anti-religious secularist movement and the need to design a new religious education curriculum which, unlike the one it replaced, would be immune to constitutional challenges. In the face of these difficulties, contortions were performed. The result was a piece of curriculum with many moving parts and this makes it easy for critics to distort and misrepresent it. The aim of *Différence et liberté*, by the preeminent Quebec philosopher and public intellectual Georges Leroux, is to argue that a mandatory ethics and religions curriculum is a necessary educational response on the part of the state to Western societies' pluralism. As he develops this argument, Leroux defends Québec's own curriculum against the most serious of the many objections that are routinely levied against it in the public discourse.

Despite the government's attempt to devise a curriculum that is consistent with the Canadian and Quebec Charters of Rights and Freedoms, it has nevertheless been faced with two major legal challenges, which were both heard by the Supreme Court of Canada. In the Drummondville parents' case (*S.L. v. Commission scolaire des Chênes*, 2012), a group of Catholic parents and their supporters took issue with the curriculum's mandatory character. The parents argued that exposing their children to different religious traditions in school violated their right to religious freedom because it undermined their ability to pass on their faith to their children. They requested that their children be granted an exemption from attending the class, a request which the Supreme Court denied. Leroux applauds the court's position in this affair – which, stated simply, was that, given Canada's multicultural nature, exposing children to different religious facts in school is no more or less of a

threat to their parents' religious freedom than everyday life – and moves on quickly to address what Leroux considers to be the thornier case of Loyola High School (*Loyola High School v. Quebec*, 2015). In a complex case that raised such intractable questions as teacher neutrality and whether groups as well as individuals are bearers of constitutional rights and freedoms, Loyola High School, a private Catholic school for boys, appealed for an exemption from its legal obligation to teach the curriculum under Quebec's education laws. The court's decision can hardly be described as a clear victory for Loyola but it did recognize that the requirement to teach the six world religions making up the religions aspect of the curriculum (i.e., Native American Spirituality, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam) "impartially" significantly hindered the school's ability to pursue its religious educational mission. The court also recognized the school's right to treat Catholicism and deal with the ethics aspect of the curriculum from a Catholic perspective. Viewing this as a major blow to education for pluralism, Leroux's position on the Loyola decision is that it amounts to an "anti-modern" refusal of the idea that citizens in modern democratic societies need to speak to each other in a common, principle-based, public language that operates in abstraction from any religious beliefs they might adhere to.

Having dispensed with these legal disputes, Leroux turns to a pair of recurrent populist objections to Quebec's ethics and religions curriculum: that teaching about religions in schools constitutes the illegitimate promotion of religious belief via the public school system and – an objection that makes no sense unless one has a basic grasp of the intellectual history of Quebec's independence movement – that it is tantamount to indoctrination into "Canadian multiculturalism."

Leroux's response to the first objection involves two steps. First, by way of an anecdote from his own experience as a commissioner involved in the elaboration of the curriculum in the early 2000s, Leroux gives the lie to the popular conspiracy theory that the religious education curriculum is a secret instrument of the Catholic Church. He recounts the moment during the development of the curriculum when the representative of the Catholic episcopate, seeing that the Ministry of Education was no longer a partner they could count on to advance their cause, quietly walked away from the talks, never to return. "It was an historic moment," Leroux writes, "a hundred years of history were coming to an end before our very eyes" (p. 93). Leroux's other response to the suggestion that religious education serves as a vehicle for promoting religious belief is to reiterate an argument that is a mainstay of the Anglo-American academic discourse: religious education is compatible with the principles of state secularism as long as the "cultural" approach to teaching and learning about religions is adhered to. When religious education remains impartial, descriptive and respectful, that is, it becomes a form of citizenship education aimed at promoting mutual understanding between co-citizens. And this is exactly the approach prescribed by Quebec's ethics and religions curriculum.

But why should Quebec, or any other society for that matter, have an obligation to encourage understanding and respect towards the religious beliefs and cultural practices of newcomers and minorities? Isn't it rather they who have a responsibility to adapt to the dominant culture by learning the language and figuring out how to fit in? These may be the guiding questions of a certain nationalist faction in Quebec opposed to the ethics and religions curriculum on the grounds that it, like the federal policy framework of multiculturalism, reduces Quebec culture and identity to one "nation" among a multitude of others, even in Quebec itself. Leroux's reply to these concerns, in the first instance, is to point out various inconsistencies and errors of fact in their proponents' assertions. For example, the ethics and religions curriculum is sometimes maligned as propaganda tool to make "reasonable accommodation" seem palatable to Quebecers. The fact is, however, the curriculum was done and dusted by 2006 when the public crisis around reasonable accommodations erupted in Quebec. Leroux also points out that if they were serious about affirming Quebec's identity through the education system, the nationalist critics would advocate for a confession-based system of religious education similar to the one in place in several northern European states, which they never do.

If Leroux has little patience for such objections, he takes very seriously indeed two pitfalls of education for pluralism: the risk of promoting a "relativistic" outlook among young people and failing to respect their freedom of conscience. With regard to the first, a dense discussion in which distinctions between various kinds of pluralism (cultural, philosophical, normative, moral, religious, epistemological) and dialogue (cumulative, disputative, critical, as meeting, method and "infinite search") proliferate essentially comes down to the observation that, if anything, a central aim of Quebec's ethics and religions curriculum is precisely to discourage relativism. The ethics and dialogue components of the curriculum, Leroux points out, are expressly designed to teach young people to think critically and engage in reasoned argument about ethical and social issues. Concerning the question of how to ensure that education for pluralism is respectful of young people's right to autonomy with regard to their emerging identities, for Leroux, the key is "neutrality." In his view, education for pluralism must meet three conditions if it is to be considered adequately neutral in this respect. It must be non-discriminatory, fact-based, and prioritize the search for common ground in a pluralistic context – as it happens, all defining features of Quebec's ethics and religions curriculum.

It is here, in Leroux's discussion of neutrality, where a worrying misunderstanding crops up. Leroux makes an essentialist distinction between dialogue about ethical issues and the pursuit of the common good, on one hand, and dialogue about religious commitments, on the other. The former is truth-seeking, critical, universalist, and reason-based. Dialogue around religious commitments, by contrast, is characterized by respect for beliefs held on the basis of faith and animated by a desire to comprehend others' religious perspectives. It is

not easy to tell whether Leroux is stating a personal view that teachers working in citizenship education *should* recognize these two qualitatively distinct registers of dialogue, but one thing is clear: the distinction is not recognized by Quebec's ethics and religions curriculum. The neutrality requirement applies to teachers only. Out of respect for their pupils' personal viewpoints, teachers are required to remain "impartial and objective" in the teaching of ethics and religions; out of concern for unduly influencing pupils, teachers are advised to "abstain from stating their own opinions" in class. Pupils, on the other hand, are free to express their opinions on the issues raised in an ethics and religions class as long as it is done respectfully, inclusively, and in accordance with basic rules of reasoning and argumentation. If teaching pupils that they are somehow not allowed to criticize religious beliefs or practices were a curricular objective, this would squarely contradict the curriculum's other aim of promoting critical thinking about ethical and social questions.

In the last part of the book, Leroux quits the role of the public defender and turns instead to a constructive critique of the ethics and religions curriculum. His starting point is the often voiced criticism that, if the curriculum aims to encourage mutual understanding between citizens, then why does it deal only with religious worldviews? After all, many people's sense of identity is not informed by religious belief at all and, even for those who are religious, religion is likely but one of multiple sources of identity. According to this critique, the curriculum needs to be complemented with a set of secular ideals of the good life – ideals like self-reliant individualism, the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, a life of altruism or charity, or commitment to ecology and trans-generational justice – in addition to the current six major religious traditions. Leroux takes this critique one step farther, arguing that such a study of "substantive models of the good life" also has the potential to operate as a counterweight to the knowledge and work-skills focus of contemporary public education. Leroux's ambition in this part of the book is nothing less than to propose a "paideia for our times" (p. 268): an educational regime consisting of introducing young people to a range of ancient and modern models of the good life and human virtue, primarily through the study of literature, in order to awaken their capacity to autonomously choose a conception of the good life for themselves. The idea is bold and refreshing but is it really, as Leroux thinks it is, "compatible with the finalities and competencies of the ethics and religions curriculum" (p. 269)?

What protects the curriculum from the charge that it violates the right to freedom of religion and conscience is its descriptive character. It is imperative that the secular school system avoid the perception that it is in the business of promoting religiosity. The formula for teaching religion in secular schools, fundamental to the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/OSIHR, 2007) and widely endorsed internationally, is to treat religions as a knowledge area like any other. Religious education

must not be seen as an ideological menu that young people are invited to pick and choose from. One can undoubtedly sympathize with Leroux's point that limiting the ethics curriculum to analysis, argumentation and the search for principles deprives young people of access to a rich philosophical and literary tradition on human virtue and the meaning of a life well lived. The proposal, however, has a crucial weakness which Leroux does not anticipate. For the same legal reasons why the teaching of religious must remain descriptive, and teachers must abstain from promoting or denigrating religious traditions or worldviews, so too, it might be objected, teachers must remain impartial about non-religious worldviews. Might not reflection on various secular conceptions of the good life in an ethics and religions class, in particular when its purpose is to invite young people to weigh their relative merits in view of making a personal choice in this area, also be perceived as a threat to the Charter right to freedom of conscience?

In the main, the public debate over Quebec's ethics and religions curriculum unfolds like a dialogue of the deaf between firmly entrenched for and against camps. In this context, *Différence et liberté* stands out for being undogmatic, unafraid to ask the hard questions about the curriculum, and pursue them where they lead. If philosophical depth and intellectual honesty are the book's greatest strengths, its greatest weakness is that it peddles a common misconception about the curriculum that its anti-religious critics are all too happy to exploit – namely, that it promotes categorical and uncritical respect for religious beliefs and practices. The mistake raises an unsettling question about the viability of the curriculum in its present form: if Leroux, an author of the curriculum itself and one of its most vocal public advocates, doesn't quite have its aims straight, what are the chances that the teachers teaching it do?

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