



March 11, 2008

Madame Michelle Courchesne
Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports
1035 De La Chevrotière, 16th Floor
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Dear Minister,

The place of religion in schools has changed significantly over the past several years. First was the dismantling of denominational structures within school boards and public schools and now beginning in September 2008, confessional religious instruction will be replaced by an *Ethics and Religious Culture program* (ERC). Throughout this process, we have made it a point to express our opinions in a constructive fashion.

We have carefully studied the new program through consultations on the provisional version and again after its official approval in July 2007. We recognize that a serious effort has been made to take into consideration particular comments submitted on June 1, 2005 in our brief to the *Commission de l'Éducation concernant l'enseignement religieux à l'école*, as well as in our response to the consultation requested by the *Comité sur les affaires religieuses* in 2006. If adopted in its present form, it is our opinion that the ERC program has certain important advantages but also serious limitations. Our purpose is to communicate our major concerns in this analysis to the government and general public.

First of all we acknowledge there are **many considerable advantages** in the *Ethics and Religious Culture* (ERC) program.

- The program respects the right to equality as a fundamental value of a democratic society without denying either a variety of affiliations or the particular importance of Catholic and Protestant Christianity in the history and culture of Québec.
- It will promote the development of a better mutual understanding between those who have different religious or secular beliefs, and enable youth to develop mutual respect through dialogues on ethical and religious questions.
- The program will help to “develop a capacity to think for oneself, to use critical and creative thinking [...], to be cognizant of and respect the basic values of

Québec society” (*Elementary*, p. 30). This last component aims for the possibility of sharing common values despite individual choices, in so far as what concerns living together harmoniously.

- The integration of ethical and religious paths brings to light the *complementarity* of these two domains in the formation of ethical judgment (*Elementary*, p. 8), whereas contemporary culture tends to restrict ethics to a single, rational domain.
- The place of religion in society is valued. This represents an important contribution within a context where a certain lay concept would tend to restrict religion to the private domain, and where all instruction related to religion would be completely removed from scholastic programs.
- To exceed, to a certain extent, the limitations of an exterior and objective analysis of the ERC program referring to the subject of religious phenomenon, it has been stated that *knowledge of these aspects [of the program] will enable students to grasp [...] the experiential, historic, doctrinal, moral, ritualistic, literary, artistic, social and political dimensions of religion*” (*Elementary*, p.9).
- To compensate for parceling out the program in fragments that are more or less unrelated, two themes in the second cycle of the secondary level, (“*Religions throughout the ages*” and “*The religious experience*”) aim to *facilitate the establishment of significant connections between the different aspects of religion among students in order for them to capture its coherence, complexity and its particular insight.*¹ (Free translation)

We also wish to indicate ***a certain number of limitations and difficulties*** that are quite inherent in the nature of ERC program. However, we feel that some of these can be avoided.

- A phenomenological approach imposes important limitations regarding the comprehension that students may be able to acquire concerning the subject of religious experience. The program aims to make certain religious *manifestations* understood as socio-cultural phenomena. This approach implies taking a critical distance with respect to the subject’s experience, which supposes a capacity for abstraction and leads to a process of relativism that we find inappropriate at all elementary and secondary levels.
- The interior coherence of religions may not be perceived through a succession of examples taken in turn from different religions. One may ask what effect that such a “kaleidoscope” would have on students, since their personal identity is only at a developmental stage. In our opinion, it is not sufficient to respond that students have already been exposed to similar experiences

¹ COMITÉ SUR LES AFFAIRES RELIGIEUSES, *Brief submitted to the Minister of Education*, July 2007, p.8.

through the media or their own environment. The school must be a place of integration rather than a reproduction of the surrounding cultural diversity.

- The program maintains a pretense to neutrality which we observe with caution. A certain vision of the world and human beings must inevitably underlie a program dealing with questions of ethical and religious orders. Thus the basic concept of the person within the program does not integrate the spiritual or transcendental dimension in any systematic way. Spiritual needs are not even mentioned among the examples relating to human needs. (*Elementary*, p. 60). This dimension does not appear when there are questions of identity (p. 62) or freedom (*Secondary*, p. 56). At most, the spiritual dimension of human beings is inferred in the second cycle of the secondary level through the perspective of two themes: *Existential questions* and *The religious experience* (*Secondary*, p. 84).
- Though the program may refer to a “personal development domain”, the objectives of this order pertain to a second rank since they are only envisioned indirectly, ceding the stage to a perspective of citizenship education of living together within the context of a pluralist democracy.² (Free translation) For example, the moral values presented are chosen only if they pertain to living together harmoniously, but the program provides few benchmarks for conducting one’s personal life. Ethical reflection “permits” personal moral development (p. 8) but it does not appear as an explicit objective. The expression of one’s convictions is “possible” (*Elementary*, p. 10) without being encouraged. Self-knowledge is not a program objective at the same level as awareness of other people, although “the development of personal identity” constitutes a clearly *related element of the content* (*Elementary*, p. 62).
- While the *elements of compulsory content* may be explored through different *examples*, it is impossible to know precisely, with a single reading of the program, what aspects of different religions will be presented or how the time will be allotted between the two components of ethics and religious culture. The current suggestions about presenting different religious traditions (*Elementary*, p.67) are also subject to various interpretations. There is considerable margin to maneuver left to pedagogues concerned with implementing the program. Thus, we must question the degree of preparation of a good percentage of the teaching personnel.
- There is a strong impression of overload in reading the program, at the elementary as well as the secondary level. Will the multiple and complex elements addressed allow teachers to cover the entire content of the Ethics and Religious Cultural program within the allotted time?

² Cf. Georges LEROUX, *Éthique, culture religieuse, dialogue. Arguments pour un programme*, Fides, 2007, p. 67-68, 84-86.

Only our experiences with the ERC program will enable us to judge if its advantages outweigh its limitations and which positive or negative effects it will have on our youth. We also express certain concerns about the implementation of this program.

The Compulsory Nature of the Program

The government's decision to make the ERC program compulsory and exclusive raises the question of State's role in matters pertaining to moral and religious education. While we understand the universal goal of a program designed to promote harmonious living with others, whenever we touch on the ethical and religious dimensions of social interaction, it becomes very delicate to introduce any element that could potentially restrict freedom of conscience. We have previously stated reasons why we would find it difficult to consider the program neutral. It seems inevitable that the concept evolving from this teaching would correspond primarily to a social sciences understanding of religion rather than that of religious denominations or of a good number of families. Due to the authority that the school content carries, will young people consider this perspective the most relevant?

The Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops has already expressed its preference for respecting parental choice concerning school programs related to religion³. We wish to reiterate our conviction that in matters concerning freedom of conscience, we concur that all possible efforts must be taken to ensure complete respect.

If, for example, it happened that the ERC program itself or the way it was taught tended to cause our youth to react with confusion, relativism, with a restricted interpretation of religious faith, or a rationalist humanism, there would be conflicts with many people's convictions and the program's compulsory nature would likely be contested. At the same time, it could damage the rapport and confidence between children and their parents in the exercise of their responsibilities in matters of religious and moral education. In such case, we may perceive that certain parents would have recourse to the right of exemption as it exists in the Law concerning Public Instruction (Art. 222).

We acknowledge there must be very serious reasons to justify exemption from a school program. Without a doubt, the most serious reason would be the violation of freedom of conscience, which is a fundamental right. We feel that the program itself does not seem to be open to such *a priori* objection. At the same time, while we may anticipate the concerns enumerated in the preceding paragraph, they cannot be confirmed until the program is implemented. It is rather *a posteriori*, based on actual experience, that in our opinion, requests for exemptions may be considered in cases where sufficiently serious concerns are recognized.

³ *Position of the AQCB on confessional religious instruction in public schools* (October 24, 2004); *a brief presented by the AQCB to the Commission de l'Éducation concernant l'enseignement religieux à l'école – Bill 95* (June 1, 2005).

Teacher Education

The universities have undertaken serious efforts to offer good initial training for future teachers of ethics and religious culture at the *secondary level*. There is evidence of sufficient preparation at this level. At *Université Laval*, from the time the Government clearly indicated its position on religious instruction in 2005, the number of requests for admission to a bachelor's degree in secondary instruction (history/ethics and religious culture) has increased considerably (70 applications for 21 available places), whereas in previous years there had been almost no demand.

The situation is more complex concerning the *elementary level* and the *specific training sessions* for instructors. To support our position, we cite an extract from a brief submitted by the *Faculté de théologie et de sciences des religion* of the *Université de Montréal* to the Bouchard-Taylor Commission:

The Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies has closely collaborated with the Faculty of Education and the Department of Philosophy to develop a Bachelor of Education Degree in Ethics and Religious Culture at the secondary level. This has been offered by the Université de Montréal since September 2006. This year (2007-2008) all available places in this program have been filled. Future teachers are being prepared for this sector.

The Faculty also contributes by offering qualifying courses for training future teachers at the elementary level and, with other partners, it is actively involved in relevant teacher training techniques to prepare those involved in this specialty within the regions served by the Université de Montréal. In our opinion, however, despite these two last instances, the demands of the training program are too restricted and financial resources, too scarce. These situations risk compromising the introduction of the new program, and creating insecurity and dissatisfaction. We invite the Commission Members to bring these situations to the Government's attention and to request more adequate support for the people and institutions involved. (p. 22-23). (Free translation)

Concerning the professional development of teaching personnel at the primary level, different means are available to compensate for the present limitations in teacher formation. Some courses will be offered by the school commissions in partnership with colleges and universities, others by publishing houses that will produce educational materials. Teachers who have received professional development courses may serve as resource persons among their colleagues. For those who are less prepared, colleagues can share the course load. However, all these options have only limited efficiency. The preoccupying question still lingers. Shouldn't the Government establish basic compulsory training with favorable conditions which would satisfy the particular requirements of the ERC program?

At the secondary level, the main difficulty encountered for several years has been the generally accepted practice of considering the teaching of religious instruction as a *complementary task* categorized under “field 14” which did not require training in this discipline. Along with many others, we strongly urge that the Government cease this practice immediately upon implementing the ERC program and establish a pre-determined minimum training requirement in order to teach this program.

Methods and Implementation

Implementing this program will result in considerable challenges and it is not evident that the required human and educational resources will be provided in time for September 2008. Many parents are still poorly informed and some have reacted negatively or are completely opposed to the changes. It is difficult to predict the potential negative impact of this program on young people. For these various reasons, *we wish to plead our case for a progressive implementation of this program, at least at the primary level*, as Article 459 of the Law concerning Public Instruction authorizes. This would allow for the distribution of more information and possibly a better reception by parents. It would also provide more time for teacher training and the production of quality educational materials. It would certainly enable us to foresee the undesirable aspects of the program.

Many questions remain concerning the ERC program which will, at the very least, require a *meticulous follow-up during the implementation process and a complete evaluation at the end of a three to five year period*. This is of vital importance and we hope that you will soon be able to announce measures that attend to these issues. If ever the results of such an evaluation were to reveal pronounced concerns, we must be prepared to reconsider the possibility of offering an option that remains to be defined.

Minister Courchesne, our intention in submitting these observations is to contribute to the implementation of the objectives of the ERC program: *the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good*.

This letter will appear on our website: www.eveques.qc.ca at the beginning of next week, followed by a Statement from the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops.

We thank you for your time and attention.

Yours truly,

Martin Veillette, President AQCB
Bishop of Trois-Rivières