

The Secularist Approach to Religious Education in Publicly Funded and Independent Schools

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Conference: The Future of Religion in Publicly Funded and Private Schools
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I want to thank the Professional Development Seminars for their kind invitation to participate in this important conference. The role of religion in our secular, pluralistic and multicultural society will always engender intense debate. And no context for that debate will arouse our passions like the role of religion in the public education system.

After all, schools are meant to represent ourselves and our society. They take young and impressionable minds and expose them to the values, ideas, identity and history we wish to transmit to the next generation. It's often said that good education doesn't so much teach you what to think as it does how to think. But *how* we think is exactly where disagreement is likely to be greatest. Does our way of thinking, our very approach to knowledge, stem from a worldview based on particular religious principles and founded on the beliefs of our faith? Or do we thrive for a neutral and objective standard in which our only starting values are freedom of thought and openness to self-exploration. Is such an ideal of neutrality even possible or desirable? How we answer these questions says a lot about the foundations upon which we will seek to build our education system.

A good example of this tension comes from the Institute for Catholic Education, which in its stated objectives, sets itself up as the protectors of catholic education in Ontario. Their document "Curriculum Matters: a Resource for Catholic Educators", calls for embedding the moral framework of Catholicism into the curriculum whenever possible. In speaking of the "moral dimension of curriculum", the authors describe themselves as operating "from the premise that curriculum is never 'values' neutral... it is imperative that the curriculum of Catholic schools reflect the teachings and values found within the moral framework of Catholicism." Towards that end, curriculum guides prepared for catholic teachers provide useful examples for inserting catholic teachings into every lesson of every course, even in what are clearly objective disciplines like math and science. If we take this rather aggressive

approach, an emerging array of faith-based school systems could turn into a battleground for competing values and narratives.

Yesterday in introducing topics for discussion Michael Coren raised the question, can a child's religious faith be properly and enthusiastically formed, reflected and encouraged in the public school system? My question today is, should it be? Is religion appropriate in a public school system?

So let me put my cards on the table at this point and echo the views of a majority of Ontarians when I say that I am a strong advocate for the elimination of government funded catholic schools (Forum Research Feb 2013) in Ontario and, with respect to Canada at large, I support the separation of all faith-based educational institutions from the public domain. The notion of public faith schools, in the case of Ontario public catholic schools, is a contradiction in terms.

Audience poll: Do you support faith-based school systems within public education?

We're all familiar with the designation of the two school systems as the public secular school system and the catholic **separate** school system. But this is really misleading. In the sense of tax-payer support, they are both every bit public, not separate, systems. General revenues, and not property tax, account for over 90% of the funding for both catholic and secular schools. But to call them public catholic schools exposes the fundamental conflict. For if you look up the definition of public in the dictionary you will see it defined as "of or concerning the people as a whole" or "the people in general, regardless of membership of any particular group." Is it appropriate within public education to have a system that is truly funded by the public and mandated to be open and accessible to all pupils, at least in high school grades, but in which the values transmitted are those of one distinct group? I don't think it is.

This conference is concerned with both public and private schools, but I need to make a distinction clear. Governments should not be in the business of running religious institutions, including faith-based schools. Fairness demands that no religious worldview be privileged over others. Government-funded faith schools inevitably bring discrimination into a public institution, which is unacceptable. But by the same token it would be unacceptable to discriminate by prohibiting the operation of private faith schools so long as private schools in general are open for business.

With respect to private faith schools, I do find the division of students into different educational silos on the basis of their parent's religion unfortunate and I worry about the lack of exposure such students will enjoy with pupils of diverse backgrounds. And as to father d'souza desire to see mere tolerance replaced with genuine fellowship, as he expressed yesterday, I would argue that such an admirable objective is best advanced within a single public school system.

But provided students are receiving the standards of educational quality they require to flourish in today's society, whether they are best served within a private faith school or the public system is a decision best left up to parents. My interest is squarely on how we build a **public** school system that is fair, open and inclusive, that is, truly public.

I intend to explain what's wrong with bringing faith-based institutions into the public domain, with special emphasis on the situation here in Ontario. Then I will explain what positive role I see religion playing in our public schools.

It's too easy to dismiss my position for the elimination of government-funded Roman Catholic schools as emanating from a deep-seated hatred of the Catholic religion. But in fact what I advocate is a political position supported by a majority of Ontarians and even a surprisingly large percentage of Catholics.

This is not an attack on religion. The One School System Network, a coalition of groups that has long advocated this position, incorporates Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Muslim organizations, as well as trustee, teacher, and civil rights groups that have no religious affiliation at all.

Another misconception to get out of the way is the notion that only catholics pay for catholic education. This is crucial and it is probably the number one myth clouding any rational debate on this policy issue. So let's deal with it quickly. When a catholic school or secular school supporter declares on their property tax form which of the two systems they support, that action has no effect whatsoever on how much funding their school board receives. Actual school board funding is determined based on the provincial funding formula and includes parameters unique to each board like enrolment numbers, geographic circumstances, special education, ESL programs, etc. The vast majority of the funds to pay for education in Ontario come from general government revenues. Since the per pupil cost to educate a student in the catholic system is higher than that for a student in the secular system, it works out that non-catholics are subsidizing a catholic religious institution.

The best evidence that government-supported catholic schools are indefensible is the fact that the government never offers any real defense. When politicians of all stripes are challenged on the status quo you will never hear substantive defense on philosophical, ethical, economic, human rights or any other meaningful grounds. All you will be told about the elimination of catholic schools is that it can't be done, which is flatly untrue, or that it won't be done, which is merely cynical and cowardly. It was done in Manitoba. It was done more recently in Quebec and Newfoundland. Ontario is now unique as being the only province *not* to have undertaken the supposedly impossible step of modernizing its educational system in this way.

Ok so what's the problem with government-funded catholic schools and by extension the marriage of faith and public education.

Well for starters it's expensive and we can't afford it. Ontario's accumulated debt stands at \$295.8 billion dollars. We don't have an exact figure for the savings that would be enjoyed by merging the two school systems; such a calculation is dependent on a variety of factors, but we know the savings are expected to be about \$1-1.5 billion per year.

A March 2012 study prepared by William J. Phillips, Past President of the Federation of Urban Neighborhoods of Ontario, found that a merger would save \$1.3 to \$1.6 billion per year. He arrived at that figure by adding the cost savings from a variety of areas: administrative and governance costs from merging boards within the same geographic area, reduced school operations costs since we wouldn't need as many physical buildings, student transportation costs through the elimination of duplicate buses and shortened average travel time. Students are oftentimes bussed well past their closest school so they can go to the school that conform to the religion of their parents or alternatively so that they can go to a non-religious school. There are also environmental and recreational implications here as well, as more students will be able to walk or bicycle to school.

Phillips' savings estimate is consistent with a 2011 study undertaken by a former French school trustee and retired vice chair of the Conseil scolaire Viamonde, Gilles Arpin, which projects a savings of over \$1.4 billion per year, using a somewhat different model. If these are the figures associated with having one duplicate system imagine the costs of running multiple parallel faith-based school systems within the public domain. An attempt at 8 separate faith-based school boards nearly bankrupted the province of Newfoundland's educational budget.

It's important to clarify that very few teachers would be affected by a merger. Savings would largely come from reductions in the number of support personnel: trustees, directors of education, superintendents and school principals. While the number of school boards would decrease considerably, the number of actual schools would decrease much less. The number of teachers would hardly change at all.

It's funny that none of this financial analysis was included in Don Drummond's landmark report, the Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services. You remember, the report that was supposed to leave no stone unturned, the report that was supposed to provide for transformational change in the way Ontario provides public services, the report that was tasked with identifying "areas of overlap and duplication that could be eliminated to save taxpayer dollars."

When asked why he failed to include such a recommendation to merge the school systems, Drummond pointed out the political challenge such a recommendation would face. In other words, the suggestion was useless because it was seen as being unpalatable to politicians and the public. What does it tell us about our priorities as a society that eliminating a duplication that would have no negative consequence on the quality of a public service, and would actually improve the efficiency of the service, that that recommendation was not even considered but it wasn't seen as unpalatable to suggest that hospital expansions be abandoned, that wages for public sector employees be rolled back, that higher income seniors start paying more for prescription drugs, that we reduce planned expenditures in long term care homes, that core services that benefit all ontarians regardless of religion be sacrificed rather than remove an entitlement enjoyed by a single religion.

Analyzed in economic terms we see the matter really is a question of warped priorities, which leads to the real argument against faith schools in the public domain: basic fairness.

Catholic schools are funded by everyone in this room, catholic, muslim, jew, buddhist, hindu, sikh, atheist, everyone, but catholic schools have a protected privilege to deny teaching positions to non catholics. That is, currently one third of Ontario's publicly funded teaching positions are closed to teachers from two thirds of the population. Think about that if you are a newly trained teacher trying to find a job in a competitive field where positions are scarce. If you happen to be catholic you have 50% more available teaching spots than if you happen to be non-catholic. And you are subsidizing those

teaching positions. Even Catholics can be denied a teaching position if the faith portfolio they may be required to submit is not up to snuff.

Not only in hiring but at every step of your career as a teacher you are discriminated against as a non-Catholic. From the website of the Ontario Catholic Education Community Network, Catholic boards have the right “to take matters of faith into account in hiring, advancing, promoting and dismissing employees.”

We know of examples of non-Catholic teachers for whom exceptions were made to teach in a Catholic school, perhaps the school was short of a qualified teacher for a particular course. But those teachers can, and in several documented cases have been, dismissed when a Catholic teacher became available to fill that position. Even Catholic teachers are at risk of dismissal, should they stop living according to the mandated Catholic lifestyle, as Margaret Caldwell learned when she was dismissed from her job for marrying a divorced man in a civil ceremony. And then there are the teachers who pretend to be Catholic or actually convert to Catholicism just to get a job, as was reported in an exposé in the *Globe and Mail* in May 2010.

The United Nations has twice found Canada in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights for discrimination in the hiring practices of our Catholic public schools. Not only are we a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but it was the model for our own Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The UN condemnation followed from complaints made by a non-Catholic teacher who was left in low pay positions as a supply teacher while his Catholic colleagues were promoted to permanent positions.

While my examples above of necessity point to conditions in the Catholic school system let's keep in mind that this hiring discrimination within a public institution would exist in any faith-based school system that were brought within government jurisdiction.

Similarly, in the current arrangement, students of non-Catholic parents may be denied admission to Catholic elementary schools. Admission to elementary schools often requires students to provide proof of baptism.

Since religion is often correlated with ethnicity and cultural background, the segregation of students into two silos based on their parents' religion reduces the effectiveness of the Ontario educational system in terms of its critical role in integrating students of all ethnicity, culture and religion.

A vast body of empirical scientific evidence from sociology and psychology has shown that such segregation increases the frequency of prejudice and mistrust, and reduces openness and tolerance. This is antithetical to the objective of public education to foster social cohesion in a multicultural and pluralistic country. In response to the 2007 voter-rejected Progressive Conservative proposal to fund all faith schools, McGuinty praised Ontario schools for their inclusivity, equality and diversity, while ironically defending the still segregationist status quo.

Not only teachers, but children have rights too, and they have the right to a full education and to experience the range of cultures and perspectives which they will encounter living and working in Canada. It is critical to their future role as engaged citizens that students grow up in an environment where children of all backgrounds can freely interact and collaborate, rather than one in which they are constantly receiving signals through the institutional structure itself, that one religion is special.

Children also have the right to learn about all religions, because whatever your beliefs, we know religion is an important force in shaping the world. Which is why I fully support religious education within a single public secular school system, as I will explain later.

Catholic schools get away with actions that would count as unconstitutional violations of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms were they committed by any other public institution, while their practice of religious discrimination in hiring and service provision constitutes actions that are prohibited under human rights laws even in many private institutions.

The Catholic school board's bully pulpit, the powerful Institute for Catholic Education, has long been a source of friction with the constitutional and human rights of children. And here I do want to take issue with a point made by father Dr. Mario d'souza in his otherwise excellent and insightful speech yesterday, that constitutions are passionless documents. Quite to the contrary, nothing excites my passion more than when young people are denied basic rights that have taken centuries to establish.

First, free speech. Catholic school boards have banned books with which some parents took issue, they've actually gone into their high school libraries and pulled books off the shelf, books like the award winning teenage fantasy novel *The Golden Compass*. Why? Because the author was an atheist. So are roughly one quarter of Canadians, but no matter.

In March 2011 pro-choice students were suspended for wearing a green piece of tape with the word "choice" on a day when a school-sponsored events encouraged students to wear red tape

emblazoned with the word "life". Meanwhile Catholic schools across the province cancel a day of class each year to subsidize with our tax dollars annual trips to Ottawa to host pro-life rallies.

When human rights conflict with catholic values it isn't always clear legally speaking who wins. But even if justice prevails, the costs are high. Consider the case of Marc Hall who in 2002 had to sue his school in order to bring his same sex partner to his prom. The courts granted an injunction that gave Hall his fundamental rights, but with a weird twist which in its implications for religious freedom should be of concern to all. In order to pass the injunction the Court had to reinterpret Catholic doctrine and rule that bringing a same-sex date to the prom was not sinful, and was in fact consistent with Catholicism.

The government and the courts should involve themselves in the interpretation of religion as little as possible. Yet when religious institutions are brought within the public domain the entanglement of government and religion becomes perpetual. Government and religion inevitably clash and both ultimately lose. Sometimes caught in the crossfire are the most vulnerable of our students.

A good recent example saw gay and lesbian students as the casualties in a war between the government and the bishops. Bishops, who seek to call the shots on matters of dogma within the catholic school system, targeted Gay Straight Alliances. GSAs are student groups that seek to respond to the tragic levels of bullying and suicide experienced by gay students in Ontario through open forums where gay students can express themselves freely. But catholic Bishops forbid GSAs. Anti-bullying student clubs were welcomed, the Bishops insisted, so long as they not contain the word gay, and apparently rainbow alliance wouldn't do either - too politically charged.

In other words the Bishops really wanted to support gay students, just as long as they got to censor the very identity of gay students. Doing everything to avoid hearing the word gay is a bit like the former don't ask, don't tell policy of the US armed forces. Ironically, that attitude underpinning the prohibition of GSAs is the problem that GSAs are trying to cure.

According to the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, denying a student the right to start a GSA violates their constitutional rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association and the fundamental right to equality. Yes during the legislative debate culminating in the passage of Bill 13, the Accepting Schools Act, which mandated GSAs when students request one, the general secretary of the

Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, went on record stating that Catholic schools' denominational privilege “would supersede Ministry of Education proposed curriculum content.”

This is the paradox I am referring to of public catholic schools, or the public support for faith-based education in general. Conflict of interest becomes perennial. The government’s commitment to the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all its citizens will perpetually be at odds with the narrow concerns of one special interest group to promulgate their unique set of beliefs.

The GSA controversy makes the point that the separation of faith-based schools from government is in the best interest of both parties. The entanglement of church and state in Ontario’s publicly funded religious schools has already led to the judiciary and the government ruling on matters of religious doctrine, and that is a situation that doesn’t benefit either state or church.

With respect to GSA’s the government lost. It was forced to undertake the drastic action of passing legislation, Bill 13, merely to enforce the constitutional rights of students. And even with Bill 13 being the law, students are still being denied their right to form GSAs. The government’s credibility has been seriously battered. They seem unable or unwilling to enforce their own laws.

But Catholics are losing too. Increasingly columns in leading Catholic publications like Catholic Insight and Catholic Register are calling for catholic schools to move away from government funding. If the point of having a separate system is to preserve a unique identity, character and flavour that role is becoming untenable within the public domain. After the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association decided to march in the World Pride parade, Catholic Insight ran a column arguing “its time for faithful catholics to take back our catholic schools. Publicly-funded Catholic schools are broken beyond repair. Its time to establish parochial schools that are authentically Catholic.” Other critics charge that textbooks have abandoned their commitment to church doctrine, that sex education is not chaste enough, and many took issue when one catholic school offered a muslim prayer room. Further dilution of the Catholic system will only accelerate now that it has come to public attention that the Education Act allows students to opt out of religion in religious schools.

Perhaps we will come to a point where protectors of authentic catholic education and proponents of a single school system will see that it is in both our interests to move faith-based educational institutions into the private domain. In that scenario faith schools can flourish, independ and

in control, while public schools can remain open, inclusive and fully committed to the fundamental rights and freedoms of all pupils.

So to return to my earlier reformulation of Michael Coren's question, should a child's religious faith be properly and enthusiastically formed, reflected and encouraged in the public school system? I have argued that attempting to do so will only water down faith and lead secular society into nightmare situations, forever patrolling faith-based school systems and forced to make impossible decisions. Do all religious sects, no matter how extreme, get to setup a school system within the public domain? Do we draw the line somewhere?

Religious favouritism has no place in government, but that doesn't mean religion itself has no place in public schools, or public institutions generally. While I am not in favour of religious instruction in school, I am in favour of *educating students about religion*.

Religion is a powerful force in the world, throughout history and today - and students should learn about it. But without endorsement, explicit or implicit. Yesterday Julius de Jager described the sense that there is the secular public versus the religious private. I think that's a false dichotomy, at least as far as I define secularism. Mine is an open secularism where religious beliefs are welcomed equally, but in which such equality demands that none be privileged by the infrastructure of the state. And I would approach religious education within public schools in the same way.

I am a strong advocate for world religion classes which I see as critical to ensure students understand each other and can thrive in a multicultural and pluralistic society. It is possible to teach about different beliefs and practices without the teacher, school or government endorsing any one religious - or non-religious- viewpoint, but fostering an environment of interest and exploration. It is the difference between sharing views and imposing views.

Now I recognize that teaching religion from a neutral stance is not an easy thing to do. But here's what it comes down to. We can debate what multiculturalism and pluralism really means. We can worry that our approach to multiculturalism is flawed. But practically speaking we live in a society where we are surrounded by people with beliefs and traditions that are oftentimes startling and incomprehensible to us. Finding a way to share with others what it's like to live a certain religious tradition, but doing that without imposing or proselytizing, that may be a challenge in public schools but I would argue figuring this out is a necessity for building a healthy diverse society.

But public schools are already providing education in areas that offer challenge. Ethics, philosophy, history; these courses all touch on areas of meaning and identity and pose pedagogical difficulties. Yet we have managed to incorporate them into our curriculum. Religion is many things, but it is certainly in part ethics, philosophy and history. So there is no reason to believe public schools can not adequately educate students about religion. Public schools might bring in religious leaders to discuss the role faith has in their life. Public schools might have students attend religious services to experience first hand how a thriving religious tradition.

Schools should additionally be open to students who wish to voluntarily organize into school clubs based on religious beliefs or philosophical interests, and schools should allow students to share their beliefs and opinions on religious matters freely. In all of this my interest is not in teaching students what to think, but in fostering an environment that encourages students to think for themselves, and which arms students with all the resources and experiences to think **as deeply** for themselves as they are willing to go.

Audience poll: Do you support non-confessional world religion courses within public education?

Thank you very much.