Breaking Down Barriers:
Québec's attempt to promote social harmony through religious education in schools

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McGill University, Montreal, December 2012

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Masters of Arts, Education and Society

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Abstract

This thesis examines the social and pedagogical challenges of implementing Québec's Ethics and Religious Culture program (ERC). This program advocates multi-religious instruction as a means toward social harmony at a time when people from differing religious cultures increasingly co-exist. In this context there is a crucial need for children to learn about the culture and religious beliefs of others. The distinct culture and religious history of Québec makes it a unique setting for such a program. The thesis examines the strained and complex feelings regarding religion that have pervaded Québec society since the Quiet Revolution. In the end the thesis points to teacher preparation and the attitude of teachers as the basic elements that will make the program succeed or fail. It concludes that the implications that the ERC program carries for social harmony are substantial and historic.

Résumé

Cette thèse examine les défis sociaux et pédagogiques de la mise en application du programme Éthique et culture religieuse [ECR]. Ce programme, qui introduit un modèle d'instructions multi religieux dans les écoles, est un effort pratique visant à promouvoir l'harmonie sociale au Québec dans un contexte ou des gens de différentes croyances religieuses doivent apprendre à vivre ensemble. On reconnait ici qu`il y a un besoin critique pour nos enfants d'apprendre et de connaître les cultures et les croyances religieuses des gens qui les entoures. L'histoire culturelle et religieuse du Québec fourni un milieu unique pour un tel programme. Cette thèse examine les relations contraintes et les sentiments complexes qui se répandent dans la société québécoise au sujet de la religion depuis la révolution tranquille. En fin de compte, elle démontre que la préparation, l'éducation et l'attitude des enseignants sont les éléments de base qui feront de ce programme un succès ou un échec. Elle conclut que les implications du programme ECR pourraient avoir un impact significatif et historique sur l'harmonie sociale et le bien commun.

Abbreviations

ERC—Ethics and Religious Culture

LES—Learning and Evaluation Situation

MELS—Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport

MLLF—Mouvement Laïque de Langue Française

MLQ—Mouvement Laïque Québécois

QEP—Québec Education Program

Acknowledgements

All my gratitude goes to my first teacher, His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who inspired this project; who, when I was a child, taught me about the beauty of the world's religions and the love that transcends them; and who is still teaching me about being a good human being.

My deepest thanks goes to my advisor, Dr. Ronald Morris. Your limitless patience, insight, expertise, and kind personal support have made this thesis possible. The time that you took, not only to make academic revisions, but to sit and discuss personal experiences of your religious education in Québec during the flurry of changes that is explored herein greatly enhanced this project and infused it with important details that might otherwise have been overlooked. I can't imagine having gone through the processes with any other supervisor.

Thanks also goes to Lisa Trimble, who helped me choose my supervisor and who offered practical research solutions and emotional reassurance so naturally she hardly even knew she was doing it. Thanks to Katherine Micic, who provided me with invaluable sources, and to the rest of the class of EDER 360, who helped me achieve a much greater understanding of the feelings of beginning teachers and the ERC program. Thanks to the many MA students who have happily and patiently shared with me their teaching experiences and their thoughts on educational philosophy. Thanks so much to Louise Symington, my TOM, for

ever-present personal support and for translation.

I am the most appreciative to my mother who taught me to love reading, writing, and school, and who devoted many hours to the editing of this thesis. Thank you so much to all the other family and friends who are too numerous to list by name but whose encouragement helped me to keep writing. Special shouts out have to go to Asher, whose tearful empathy propelled me forward; Kevin, who actually read the drafts I sent him, and whose confidence was so absolute it became contagious; and most especially to Sukhi bhaiya, who came into my life at the right time, and whose love and care still give me shelter and the courage to do big things.

Let us avoid bequeathing to our children a Québec that is too narrow for them.

— Karina Chami, an intervener at the hearings held in Montreal on November 28, 2007, quoted in Bouchard-Taylor

Introduction

There is a definite hysteria that overwhelms current social conversations on the place of religion in schools. The encroachment by schools on something which has been considered the private domain of the home can inspire fear, and often, knee-jerk reactions. Much like the topic of sex education, discussing new ideas and approaches to religious education can hold great value for the welfare of society, but requires a tremendous amount of cool-headedness, thoughtful consideration, and the courage to listen to ideas that may threaten one's basic moral framework.

The very concept of the Ethics and Religious Culture course has provoked extreme responses from Québec society. The loudest voice of all seems to be that of opposition to the program; however, upon investigation one finds that a seemingly unified cry of outrage is really a collection of very different opinions, each harbouring its own point of opposition, its own distinct fear. Often these perspectives are in complete ideological contrast with each other. Take, for example, the religious parent who fears that exposure to religions other than her own in the classroom poses confusion and a general threat to her child's religious

selfhood,[1] the atheist social commentator who believes that theism is an antiquated idea having no place in the modern educational institution which should remain ever focused on science, and the overworked teacher who is wearied by the seemingly endless education reforms of the last ten years, and too busy to spend the requisite time learning to teach a new, and certainly complex, subject. These are all very different objections, all of which have merit as well as weaknesses, and all of which deserve to be explored carefully, and thoroughly, and individually. Consider, too, that the aforementioned positions are extremely simplified compared with the tangled complexity of real-life identities, and that they are only three of many commonly held viewpoints within Québec society. There are many who favour the program as well: those who see tremendous benefit in preparing students for the plural world in which they find themselves through multi-religious education and the practice of dialogue—and many of those are social leaders and experts in the fields of religion, education, and society.

I suggest here that the reason there is so much confusion, so much debate about ERC, is that we are teetering on the precipice of change, perhaps a vast change. In a world where religious pluralism is a certainty, and a source of conflict, Québec has been the first government in North America to implement a mandatory non-confessional, multi-religious class for all the students in the province. This, in my view, is an exciting development. Quebec is attempting a daring new alternative in education. Perhaps the best thing we can do for our

[1] To preserve gender neutrality the pronouns "she" and "he" are alternated throughout this thesis when denoting an unspecified person.

society then is to educate ourselves about the issues surrounding religious education and engage in dialogue. If we are to learn to live together with our differences we need to open up avenues for ongoing respectful conversations that take these differences seriously.

This thesis aims to investigate the unique historical and social setting of Québec in which this program arose**,** examine the content of the program, highlighting its strengths and outlining its common criticisms, and consider where this kind of landmark education initiative could lead. With religious, spiritual, and humanitarian leaders the world over calling for this kind of educational celebration of diversity, Québec could become a leader for education systems throughout North America, that is, if we are able to navigate through the initial confusion and uproar.

The thesis is broken into three chapters. The first presents the historical climate in which the creation of the ERC program occurred. It strives to explain why the program sprang up in Québec at this time—a phenomenon deeply connected to the unique religious foundations of Québec education. It looks at the sudden change in the population of Québec following new immigration laws in the 1970s and the changing social needs that have come with multiculturalism.

The second chapter details the ERC curriculum itself, and highlights problematic areas of the curriculum that have been identified in practice. It looks at public response to the program and explores the term "secularism" and its meanings in modern-day Québec.

The third chapter examines how the course has so far been received by

teachers. It explains that the program demands a high level of education, experience, and skill on the part of the teacher to make it successful, and that the training necessary to prepare teachers for success in ERC classrooms may be lacking. It suggests that the value the program has for society makes it worth our investing in better training and support for ERC teachers.

Chapter One: The Historical Background and Current Place of Religion in Québec

The Religious Foundations of Québec Education

Before examining the ERC program itself, it is first necessary to understand the social landscape out of which it was created, as well as its intended purpose. The first chapter of this thesis strives to provide such an understanding by presenting a brief history of religion and of education in Québec, examining the struggle to come to a common understanding of the "proper" place of religion in the social sphere, and exploring the changing needs of a plural society like Québec.

The history of Québec schools is inseparable from the history of religion in the province. The first schools were created and run by the church, even after the rise of independent governance and public schooling. Québec's Quiet Revolution in the 1960s drastically changed the reality of religious influence within schools as well as the public concept that religion should be part of public education. As Québec was faced with a growing multicultural population, the Estates General on Education in 1996, followed by the Proulx report, brought about a new way of thinking about religion in schools—from the old confessional system to the idea that school children should be taught about all world religions

in a non-doctrinal format. The Reasonable Accommodation debates of 2007 followed by the Bouchard-Taylor report on Reasonable Accommodation incited more social debate on the place of religion in schools and on the meaning of creating a secular society. Two years later, the Ethics and Religious Culture course was implemented. Today, Quebecers are struggling to define "secularism," they are debating how private religion should be, and they are struggling with what "freedom of religion" should look like in Québec, now and in the future.

The roots of Québec education are deeply religious in nature; the founding of the first schools was a pursuit of members of religious orders. Spencer Boudreau (1999), in his book *Catholic Education: The Quebec Experience*, highlights that "from the very beginning of French colonial efforts in the 17th century in North America, religious orders of men and women were involved in education in the new colony" (Boudreau, p. 9). The first schools in Québec were founded by nuns in 1639 and 1658 respectively, and the realm of public and private education continued to be dominated by Catholics and Anglicans for over three centuries. It was in fact a natural extension of church activities, as the goal of education itself was the betterment of the soul.

All schools were religiously run. It would have been inconceivable to founders of Canadian schools to have secular schools. These spheres were one and the same. The term "religious education" was in fact redundant, as the goal of education was religious salvation. Lois Sweet (1997), exploring this in her book *God in the Classroom*, explains that education existed as a means to become a better Christian. She asserts, regarding the founders of schools throughout

Canada: “Secular education was not only inconceivable to most of them, it was an oxymoron. To them, education and religion were part and parcel of the same thing—an essential good, a necessary whole” (Sweet, 1997). Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, points out the importance of considering that, not only in Québec but throughout history the world over, religion and education have been inextricably woven together. Religious understanding was the lens through which one saw the world. “In those societies, you couldn’t engage in any kind of public activity without ‘encountering God’” (Taylor, 2007, p. 2).

Not only was religion synonymous with daily life in the Canadian provinces, Catholicism was a buttress for French culture, and Anglicanism for British, English culture. The cultural identity of being Catholic was tied up almost as closely with being Francophone as was the French language. Catholic leadership was embedded within French-Canadian society, a situation that became exaggerated with the French defeat at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759. This event so frightened the prominent French citizens who served as community business and political leaders that most of them returned to France, or moved to Louisiana, Guyana, or elsewhere in the new colonies where the French presence was not threatened. The only French social leaders who chose to stay in the province en masse were the clergy (Brune, 2003).

With Québec under British rule, English merchants swiftly arrived to fill the gaps left by fleeing French businessmen. Suddenly Anglicanism existed as a religious possibility beside Catholicism. Even though French and English families inhabited two different worlds within the province, an alternative way of life had

emerged in Québec. Charles Taylor points to such a moment, within a religious society, as poignant. The very existence of another way of living, of understanding, of believing inevitably introduces challenges to historically unquestioned practices. A single option becomes one option among many (Taylor, 2007, p. 3).

While Anglicans remained a minority in Lower Canada as well as Upper Canada, the political support they were granted through British rule was unparalleled.

> Under the Constitution Act of 1791 one-seventh of Crown or public lands was set aside "for the support and maintenance of a Protestant Clergy." A lot of money flowed from these lands—the proceeds of logging, rental, or sales—and for several decades leaders of the Church of England claimed that revenue as their own. Wealth and the traditional status of the Established Church enhanced their influence. (Sweet, 1997, p. 22)

Anglicans were the minority in a land of Catholics, but they were tied to the new government, and were more affluent and more powerful. Not only was the Church of England promoted, but Catholicism was marginalized by the English authorities. Many Catholic churches had been destroyed during the conquest, some of the clergy had returned to France, and the new British rulers forbade Catholic orders from recruiting new members (Boudreau, 1999, p. 10). The period from 1760 to the 1840s was marked by this clash of cultures, with numerous fears arising over culture, language, and religion. French colonists were a defeated people, disenfranchised, impassioned about the work of protecting their threatened identity. Because of the divide between churches, religious identity, much like language issues, became paramount in preserving cultural identity and pride. The idea of public schooling, while itself still very new, was already

becoming complicated by religious identity. The Catholic Church staunchly refused to allow the state to take over schooling (Boudreau, p. 10). The Common Schools Act of 1816 marked the beginning of state acceptance of school for all, but "the small amount of money set aside for common schools did little to improve the education opportunities of lower-class children" (Sweet, 1997, p. 22). The Act also outlined the mandatory inclusion of Anglican religious study and devotional exercises in all common schools, forcing poor families to choose between sending their children to school and maintaining religious freedoms.

The 1840s to the 1960s marked another phase in Québec society and religion. There was a dramatic increase in Catholic presence and strength beginning in 1840, with many new religious orders coming over from France and being founded in the province. This increase, combined with a lay population that was eager to support the Church, created an exceptional boom in the size and strength of the Church in Québec by the 20th century. "Quebec's fervent Catholic population with its large families was fertile ground for vocations to the religious life. In 1961 there were 45,253 members of religious congregations in Quebec—one for every 102 Catholics in the Province" (Boudreau, p. 10).

As well, the union of Upper and Lower Canada occurred in 1840, as had been recommended by Lord Durham for the purpose of assimilation of the French-speaking population. Lord Durham, who had been sent to assess the situation in the colonies after word of rebellions had reached Britain, was extremely concerned by the dynamics between the French and English in Québec. In his 1839 report, he made clear the gravity of the English/Anglican vs.

French/Catholic cultural clash in Canada East and urged the immediate creation of responsible government, which he felt would become a starting ground for the assimilation of French culture into English, and for the creation of universal education that was neither Anglican nor Catholic. “His report of 1839 contained many recommendations, one of which proposed universal education. Let education be available to all, he suggested. Make it neutral, not sectarian, neither Anglican nor Catholic” (Sweet, 1997, p. 23). This had major implications for schools in Québec and Ontario, creating the groundwork for the provincial school systems at the time of Confederation (Sweet, 1997, p. 23).

Immediately after Lord Durham’s report, Upper and Lower Canada were merged (with Québec becoming Canada East) and the Common Schools Act of 1841 was passed. The goal of this Act was to improve schools and unify a school system for Ontario and Québec. Unifying the education system sparked a substantial impassioned separate schools debate. The most prominent social concern involved in the organizing of schools was religion. Legislation had already allowed each town to run separate public schools for the minority culture. People were adamant about separate schooling (Sweet, 1997). The schools debate was partially fuelled by Egerton Ryerson and George Brown, both prominent newspaper contributors, whose ideas and objections fostered widespread social debate about the issue. Ryerson believed that the solution to Catholics and various Protestant denominations co-habiting a single national school system was for a singular “Christian religion” to be taught in all schools, while Brown wanted a secular “democratic humanist” approach, in which religion was not touched upon

at all, but science and morality would provide guidelines for learning. People excitedly joined the debate, but when it came down to practical decisions about their own children and their own neighbourhood schools, the majority was still in favour of separate religious schools (Sweet, 1997).

In 1867 the government came up with a slightly messy way of dealing with the separate schools situation in the Constitution. Provinces would have to fund Catholic schools, but only if they were already in existence at the time of their joining Confederation (Sweet, 1997). For Québec this meant that the majority of public schools were Catholic institutions, technically run by the Québec government, but in reality operated by religious authorities.

> The responsibility for public confessional education was in the hands of the members of the Catholic and Protestant committees of the Council of Public Instruction. In 1875, all Catholic bishops in Quebec whose dioceses were partly or entirely within the boundaries of the province were granted seats on the Catholic committee. These Catholic and Protestant committees virtually ran their respective schools with little or no government interference. (Boudreau, 1999, p. 18)

Radical changes came next during the 1960s with the Quiet Revolution. French Canadians' discontent became a propeller for rapid social transformation: Québec was seen as a backward society that could not keep up with the business models of the rest of the modern Western world. Québec society changed en masse. It voiced its desire to embrace liberal ideas and new technologies. It rejected a reliance on the Catholic Church as *the* social organizing power. With this came tremendous political pressure to reform the education system, one of the primary vehicles for concrete and lasting social change. Various groups formed during the extensive social debate over what Québec should look like. One vision

was complete solidarity with the Church in favour of Québec nationalism. Catholicism was so deeply intertwined with Québec culture, politics, and family life that imagining daily life, much less a movement for national solidarity, without the Church serving as a unifying force seemed impossible. Michael Behiels (1985), in *Prelude to Quebec's Quiet Revolution*, explains that a big counter movement to this was the "group of similarly young and dedicated French Canadians of liberal and social democratic persuasion centred in the periodical *Cite libre* and in organized labour movements" (Behiels, preface, n.p.).

> Citelibristes questioned the all-pervasive influence of clericalism inherent in the Catholic church's control over education, health, and social welfare services in Quebec. A pluralistic**,** democratic, and innovative francophone society was only possible if there was a complete separation of church and state, thereby bringing an end to all forms of clericalism. (preface, n.p.)

As debates over the place and reach of Catholicism in Quebec society intensified, the MLLF (today's MLQ, or Mouvement Laïque Québécois) was founded. This group represented the most vocal anti-religious sentiment. It was founded by a handful of socially prominent Montreal writers, professors, and artists, many of whom had come from France. These founders felt that the first step in moving toward a strong independent Québec was to create a Québécois culture and identity that was rich in itself—and that, for the first time ever, would not depend on being Catholic. They felt that "… the proclamation of secularism as the foundation stone of a new democratic order signaled the end of the infallible equation between Catholic faith and being a French Canadian which had underpinned the old nationalist credo" (Gauvreau, 2005, p. 256).

The movement did figure prominently in the debate. The idea of reforming the school system to the extent that the Church would have no organizing or administrative powers (aside from possibly conducting an optional religious course during the school day) was, for the first time in the history of Québec, considered and discussed.

> The founding of Mouvement Laique de Langue Francaise (MLLF) on 8 April 1961 decisively reoriented the whole tenor of the debate on education by bringing to public attention the existence of a French speaking, non-Catholic minority that emphatically rejected confessional schools. This raised, for the first time in twentieth-century Quebec, the broader question of whether Christian religious belief itself was compatible with democratic public institutions, and whether faith had a continuing role to play as the central organizing principle of public education. (Gauvreau, 2005, p. 255)

However, the debates prior to and during the Parent Commission reports[2] highlighted an obvious desire among the public to avoid polarization. The public dismissed the Church's overwhelming authority but simultaneously wanted Catholic values to be at the heart of the new political and social world they were building (Gauvreau, 2005, p. 248). In fact, the support that the MLLF garnered did not come from the popular embracement of the MLLF's secularist philosophy itself, but from the support of religious minorities and their sympathizers: "…in the demographic context of the early 1960s any public success that MLLF might enjoy would depend, in large measure, not upon the recruitment of large numbers of agnostics to their cause, but upon convincing the Catholic majority of the need for justice for minorities" (Gauvreau, 2005, p. 257). Similarly, the movement was

[2] The massive five-volume government study concluded in 1966 aimed to create equal access to public education for all, and led, among other things, to a secularization of education and the creation of the Ministry of Education.

able to find support only in Montreal, even following efforts to create a chapter in Quebec City (Gauvreau, 2005).

It should be noted that the period of Québec's Quiet Revolution was also a time of political, social, and religious transformation throughout the rest of the Western world. Catholicism, specifically, was undergoing a revolution with the Second Vatican Council. There was a new face of Catholicism that rejected absolute and unquestioned power, that declared that the Church existed *within* the world, not beside it, that empowered its own laity, and that was suddenly encouraging of ecumenism and dialogue (Rausch, 2003). For those who were undecided about how involved they wanted the Church to be in the school system, a new Catholic experience added greater intricacy to the question.

Such a response shows the complexity of a society's movement "away" from religion (or perhaps the complexity of a society's changing relationship with religion). It is difficult to understand whether a society is truly moving away from religion, or whether it is seeking to organize power structures differently while still holding religious values to be of paramount importance in private life. According to Charles Taylor the process of secularism is not just about the retreat of religion from the public sphere. Following his philosophy of secularism (which will be explored in chapter two), we can observe the path of Québec's transformation from a singularly Catholic society to a complex plural society in which religion became a divisive force. As has been touched on earlier in this chapter, since the powerful Protestant presence in Québec from the time of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, Catholicism—indeed by the 1960s even

Christianity at large—became one option among others. A mix of reactions to this new ambiguity ensued, showcasing itself strongly at the time of the Quiet Revolution, including the beginnings of a move away from belief itself, and a reordering of "spheres" of life, with religion being relegated more or less to its own sphere as opposed to being a driving force within the worlds of education, politics, finance.

The Québécois relationship with religion may have undergone a major change, but it was in no way a black and white one. It was a vast mélange of new religious and secular ideals, and ultimately the reforms to the school system reflected this. The unquestioned power of the Church over schools was rejected and replaced with government-run school boards, but Catholic and Protestant advisory boards were created that still held influence over the teaching of religion and related subjects (philosophy, language, history) (Gavreau, 2005). And, while there were already some movements clearly in favour of organizing schools around language rather than religion**,** it proved to be too much of a departure and too extreme a measure for its day.

The Changing Needs of Multiculturalism

In the 1970s the social and political landscape changed again. As Ghosh (2004) writes, "By the mid-1970s, the Trudeau government had undertaken an extensive public review of Canadian immigration policy. The 1976 Immigration Act shifted

immigration toward non-traditional countries and 'visible minorities'" (p. 550). For the first time Québec saw an influx of immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. With a new population that did not fit squarely into the two religious options of Catholic or Protestant, as had the previous European immigrant population, there was a need to recognize non-Christian religions within Québec society. The study of the sacraments was removed from schools at this time, and in 1975 the Québec Charter of Rights and Freedoms was passed. Article 41 gave the option to parents to choose moral instead of religious education. This was the beginning of the three-option system, with schools being told that they must offer all students a choice between a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Moral Education class. Suddenly, based on socio-politically motivated law, curricula had to be created and school administrations had to find ways to accommodate the new system. It created a logistical nightmare for many schools, and the frustration that ensued among teachers and principals because they were being asked to provide a service for which they were unprepared, would be echoed during every religious policy change throughout the next 40 years and into the present day (Smith, 2011).

Throughout the 1980s the rest of Canada was undergoing the process of removing religion from schools; for example, individual provinces were passing laws that removed any remaining religious presence, like school prayer, from public schools. For Québec these actions were inconceivable. In 1982 Québec made use of the notwithstanding clause in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in order to keep confessional schools in the province, and before that,

in 1980, abrogated article 97 of the Canada Schools Act in order to have pastoral (Catholic) and religious (Protestant) animators in schools (Smith, 2011). The "animators," representing one or other religion, would make the rounds of the schools and meet with groups of students on a regular basis. Religious Animation was a response to a growing concern over the appropriateness of confessional schools in a diverse society, as it was, by its nature, optional, and was available for the purpose of meeting the spiritual needs of students, but aimed only at Catholics and Protestants.

In the mid-1990s debate over the confessional structure of Québec schools began anew. During the Estates General on Education of 1995-96 it was decided that Québec must continue moving toward the establishment of a non-confessional school system. The Commission recommended that schools be organized by linguistic, instead of confessional, boards, that all confessional systems be gradually taken out of school, and that religion be studied by all students as a cultural phenomenon, alongside civics and values. These recommendations led to a ministry-mandated task force, led by education professor Jean-Pierre Proulx. According to Boudreau (2011), "The task force conducted public consultations that included the participation of parents, school personnel, and religious and secular representatives. Funding for research was also provided and legal experts were hired to examine the question in the context of Québec and Canada's Charters of Rights and Freedoms" (p. 215). The extremely influential Proulx report contained 14 recommendations for changes regarding the nature of religion in Québec schools, again emphasizing ways of

completely de-confessionalizing schools and introducing the study of religions from a cultural perspective, all of which have since been implemented (Boudreau, 2011).

By 1999 schools were reorganized along linguistic lines, with the majority of Catholic schools becoming French schools and majority of Protestant schools becoming English schools. Québec was undergoing major curricular reforms as well, and in 2001 the new Québec Education Program was implemented. At the same time religious animators were replaced with "spiritual animators," who were brought into the schools in an attempt to fulfill the perceived spiritual needs of students, and to avoid the jolt of a sudden absence of religious presence in schools while the confessional system was being left behind.

In the first decade of the 2000s, concern over a perceived threat of multiculturalism reached a fever pitch. The increase in visible minority immigrants over the previous 30 years, combined with the seemingly continual changes to the nature of religious instruction in schools since the 1960s, eventually forced the question of "reasonable accommodation." The religious accommodation debates monopolized the media attention. The case of a Sikh boy, which revolved around the question of whether he should be permitted to carry a *kirpan* in school, generated impassioned debates. These debates were followed by the infamous case of the town of Herouxville.

> Perhaps the most notorious case of all occurred in January 2007 when a small Quebec town called Herouxville adopted a 'life standards' code of conduct for immigrants, which banned its residents from practicing female circumcision, stoning and immolation—all practices associated with a perception of Muslim barbarism. Despite the fact that Herouxville's population is almost entirely French-Canadian, with few, if any, Muslims,

> its municipal councilor asked the Quebec premier to declare a state of emergency in order to protect Quebec culture from the practice of accommodating non-Christian beliefs and practices. (Mahrouse, 2010, p. 86)

With the reasonable accommodation debate in full swing, Jean Charest responded by creating the Bouchard-Taylor Commission two weeks before calling the election. Gérard Bouchard, the widely respected Québécois sociologist, and Charles Taylor, the famous Québécois philosopher of multiculturalism, were charged with the task of investigating the social repercussions of immigration and the climate of Québec's multicultural society. The hope was that the commission would provide insight for policy making, and make clear the degree of accommodation for minority populations that could be considerable reasonable. It was a timely move that, combined with miscalculations among the other two parties, just managed to secure Charest office for another term (Belanger, 2008, p. 72-73). The Bouchard-Taylor Commission went ahead with its project, conducting over 300 public hearings all over the province, at which everyone was given the opportunity to voice their opinions, as well as 39 focus groups and 59 meetings with experts, and it produced, just over one year later, a 300-page report of its findings and a list of recommendations for government implementation.

In order to make sense of the results of the Commission, it is very important to consider the connection between the French-Canadian status as a minority population in Canada and the Québécois fear of other minority populations. Because French-Canadian culture is already struggling to survive in the sea of English Canada, there is a widespread fear that an open immigration policy will add to the population another non-French group who, if they

assimilate at all, will do so into English-Canadian culture rather than French**,** and ultimately increase the threat to the survival of French**-**Canadian culture, language, and identity (Bouchard-Taylor, 2008; Mahrouse, 2010).

> While multiculturalism is regarded as a system that fosters a pluralist society through tolerance for diversity, the emphasis of interculturalism is on the subordination of respect for diversity 'to the need to perpetuate the French-language culture', which is itself a minority identity within Canada as a whole. Thus, Quebec's policy of 'convergence' through interculturalism involves a degree of assimilation of immigrant and minority groups in order to preserve and maintain Québécois identity and culture. (Mahrouse, 2010, p. 86)

Perhaps most surprisingly, the Bouchard-Taylor report called on Quebecers to dispel this idea. While acknowledging that in other minority societies this fear may be warranted, Bouchard and Taylor asserted that for current-day Québec they found this widespread fear to be baseless. "Bouchard and Taylor's main conclusion was that the perception that Québec identity is under threat was mistaken and that 'collective life in Québec is not a critical situation'" (Mahrouse, 2010, p. 88). They found that, in fact, the assertion of French**-**Canadian identity that sprang from this fear created extreme difficulty for newly immigrated minority populations. They firmly declared that the only way toward a more peaceful and tolerant Québec society was to cultivate a more open and accepting attitude toward the "other" and to bring religious pluralism to the fore where Québec's diversity could be celebrated:

> The second thread is that of open secularism accompanied, once again, by a delicate balance to be maintained between four key constituent principles, i.e. freedom of conscience, the equality of citizens, the reciprocal autonomy between churches and the State, and State neutrality. For compelling reasons that result both from respect for ethnocultural diversity and the protection of basic rights, this equilibrium demands that religious affiliations and practices not be concealed in the private sphere.

> The most sensible, effective way to become accustomed to cultural differences, including religious affiliations, is not to hide them but to display them. This is also the condition that enables us to promote them and to benefit from them. (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 241)

The Commission decided that one important way to accomplish this was through education. They lent their support to the new Ethics and Religious Culture program.

> We strongly recommend to the government that it vigorously promote the new Ethics and Religious Culture Program that is to come into force in September 2008. It is important for the public to be aware of the program's precise purposes and content and the essential role that this teaching is to play in the Québec of the 21st century. (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 260)

In September 2008 the ERC course became mandatory for all Québec students from primary through high school. The course explores a wide variety of world religions in a non-doctrinal, non-confessional manner. As a solution to sentiments that Québec religious traditions and experiences be stressed over those of the "other," the ERC course was designed to give precedence to religions and religious history of Québec—Catholicism, Protestantism, Aboriginal traditions—while offering substantial attention to the beliefs and religious cultures of the world.

The Social Importance of the ERC Program

The potential social implications of the ERC program are vast. As the world struggles with issues of terrorism, racial violence, and religious fundamentalism,

the cultural landscape of Canada continues to grow and diversify. According to a prediction by the Canadian Council on Social Development, "By 2016, foreign-born youth and Canadian-born youth from immigrant families will make up a quarter of the country's population" (CBC). To assume that this increasing mixing of cultures and religions will prepare our children to live harmoniously without the input of education is naïve. Similarly, it is not realistic to assume that we can continue to live as we always have, acting as though the nature of the Canadian population is the same as it has been for generations. Newcomers from different cultural backgrounds are not likely to simply assimilate while simultaneously engaging in cultural practices quietly at home, or only in organized public celebrations of cultural diversity. Québec, with an extremely high level of cultural diversity in its growing population, is facing the challenge of making the adjustment to a harmonious society just as is the rest of the world. Because of the role education can play in easing such a transition, the implications of the ERC program for Québec society and for its next generation are vast.

As McDonough (2011) explores in an article about the responsibilities of liberal-democratic education, there remains some debate about the necessity of multi-religious education in order to prepare students to live successfully in a diverse world. Some argue that learning about oneself, morality, and living with others is all one needs to complete an education that will lead to a peaceable society. This position leads to the argument that multi-religious education is not necessary for the greater social good, but rather that this can be accomplished through confessional-based singular religious education, or through secular moral

education that ignores religion altogether. McDonough explains that from this standpoint, "it seems likely that children can achieve a certain degree of autonomy by thoughtful reflection and inquiry about the different life paths offered within a single religious or ethical tradition that is designed to provide a 'comprehensive' moral basis for life" (p. 228). He goes on to explain, however, that many argue against this approach, determined that, if individuals are truly to flourish, the state needs to introduce students to multiple religions.

> Most proponents of liberal-democratic education, however, require that autonomy be fostered through students' exposure to multiple ethical and religious traditions, diverse cultural perspectives, and many different individual conceptions of the good life….A major way of distinguishing between the aims of education in ethically and religiously homogenous societies and the educational aims of pluralist liberal democracies is by noting that education for personal autonomy and citizenship in the latter requires rich and meaningful exposure to these various forms of diversity. (McDonough, 2011, p. 228)

In a similar vein, the Dalai Lama, a longtime advocate of education that promotes ethics, values, and respect for other religions, spoke on the importance of teaching world religions and ethics in schools when he visited McGill University in 2009. Addressing academics and professionals in teacher education, he stressed the need for the non-confessional style of religious education used by the ERC program in schools around the world. He was especially interested in meeting future teachers of ERC. It was noteworthy that a religious leader who is known internationally for his contributions to multi-religious, social, environmental, and political dialogue would speak so enthusiastically about the program.

While citing the example of India as a society that has experienced success in hosting a peaceful pluralist society many times throughout history, the Dalai Lama made important observations about the meaning of secularism. "Many people feel secularism is … against religion. But in India [this is not how the term is understood]. Secularism means respect for all religions, including non-believers" (Dalai Lama, Lecture, October 3, 2009). He explained that in India even nihilism, which denies both an afterlife and God, co-exists among diverse religious traditions. For the Dalai Lama a successful secularism is not an *absence* of religion in the public sphere, but rather the *presence* of people who honor and respect other traditions. Similarly, a successful religious education must embrace this kind of diversity if it is to contribute to a richer and more peaceful society.

The Dalai Lama also spoke on the pairing of ethics with religious culture. In his view, a focus on ethics in religious education helps to underscore the commonalities along with the differences. He stressed the importance of including lessons in ethics right from kindergarten as a way of evoking "a spirit of valour" in children. He also cautioned that "while we are really making effort for promotional peace that doesn't mean [there will] no longer [be] any problem on this planet." Conflict will not suddenly disappear because of a school program, no matter how effective or well intentioned. The Dalai Lama emphasized the importance of learning how to engage in respectful dialogue, a dialogue that must be steeped in a richer understanding of religious difference.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is another leader in global discussions of human values and multi-religious education who stresses the importance of courses like

ERC. Co-founder with the Dalai Lama of The International Association for Human Values, Sri Sri is one of the most publicly recognized spiritual and humanitarian leaders in current-day India. In his public lectures to groups around the world, he speaks to the importance of implementing school programs that include multi-religious and values-based education.

Like the Dalai Lama, Sri Sri frequently points to a sense of separation and a tendency to see others as different from ourselves as fuelling prejudice and violence. Hence, for Sri Sri it is of paramount importance to include the study of other cultures and religious traditions in a child's education: where there is greater familiarity and understanding there cannot be fear of the unknown. For example, A Hindu child who has never been inside a mosque, and does not know what goes on inside, may experience apprehension as he walks by the mosque, and this fear may continue into adulthood. But if that same child has been taken inside the mosque, seen a weekly prayer service, heard the Imam speak, eaten with the congregation, even just once, he will have at least a small personal connection to a mosque and other Muslim children. He is more likely to develop an understanding and appreciation of commonality and difference when he interacts with other Muslim children and adults. Most importantly perhaps, he will be in a better position to critically interpret prejudicial statements and actions.

Sri Sri explains that a fundamental shift in the way we understand ourselves and others will facilitate religious education and effective dialogue. He asks people to observe the subtle hierarchy we use with regard to our personal identity, noting that we most commonly identify ourselves firstly as a citizen of a

certain country or follower of a certain religion, leaving broader identities, such as citizen of the world, human being, even simply male or female, as secondary identities. He urges that, through values-based and multi-religious education, a subtle shift can be made in one's consciousness to appreciate the value of life, of spirit, of humanity so thoroughly that it comes first to the mind when considering our own identity. "We must learn that life has to be valued more than race, religion and culture" (Shankar, 2010, July 7). He suggests that we think of ourselves first as spirit, then as human beings, then as male or female, then as a citizen of a particular nation, and finally as a member of a religious tradition. By emphasizing first what is shared by all, and secondly what is diverse, through education, students will be able to recognize a similarity in the "other" that can be used as a starting point for sharing and effective dialogue. "This dream is possible to achieve when we rise above our limited mindset of my country, my religion and my people to embrace the greater perspective of my planet" (Shankar, 2010, July 7).

Chapter Two: The Ethics and Religious Culture Program in Theory and Practice

The ERC program has received vast amounts of public attention and debate, especially considering that the program itself is a comparatively small one in the experience of the student's day, being studied for just one hour per week, and even then frequently combined with ongoing lessons in other subject areas. Perhaps it is not surprising, considering the religion-sensitive climate of current-day Québec, that any public government-sponsored program that touches upon religion in any way is targeted for thorough debate. In many cases it is as if one's stance on the ERC program has become a symbol for one's ideological position on all issues of religion and society in Québec, historical and modern-day. However, in the midst of public reactions and hyper-reactions to the program, there has been a great deal of misinformation about the content of the program and its methods and aims. Some parents went so far as to launch legal proceedings to obtain the right to be exempted from the program. For Morris (2011), this response is not at all surprising.

> These responses are not surprising given that the program embodies and signifies a major shift in the history of Québec education. The responses are potentially constructive given that they are situated in a context of ongoing debate over the place of religion in Quebec society. The range of positions on the ERC program could play an important role in clarifying the kind of secular-pluralistic society Québec aspires to be. The problem, however, is that many of the reactions and criticisms to date blatantly misrepresent the program. The public discourse is often permeated by inflammatory and sensationalist rhetoric. (Morris, 2011, p. 198)

This chapter aims to present the content and purpose of the program, and investigate the areas of the program that are controversial.

The ERC Program

As explored in the previous chapter, the historical presence of religion in Québec schools was the impetus for the new ERC program. While in many ways an evolutionary product of previous religion programs, the philosophical foundations of ERC are, in another way, a drastic deviation from the past, as the program marks a new way of teaching and learning about religion. ERC approaches the study of religion and ethics from a non-confessional sociological perspective. Back when the three-option system was in place in Québec schools, the moral education stream was offered simply as the *alternative*—the way to ensure minority freedoms while retaining a confessional system. It allowed Québec to continue teaching about religion in the doctrinal manner; an approach that was being largely rejected in Canada as old-fashioned and inappropriate for a plural society.

Today, a non-doctrinal, non-confessional course in religion and ethics is the norm for all schools; even private religiously based schools must teach ERC (although they may teach confessional religion in addition to ERC if they so choose). The non-doctrinal approach to learning about religions and ethics suits the aim of the program, which no longer includes providing education for Christian life, but rather emphasizes becoming a well-informed, tolerant, and respectful citizen. The course has great relevance to students' daily lives. In a society where religion is not commonly discussed, school-aged children frequently find the religious practices of their friends, neighbours, and even fictional characters on TV to be very mysterious. ERC helps them find answers, writes De Silva, an elementary school teacher:

> As with sex education, the students acquire bits and pieces of information about different religious traditions from a variety of sources, some more reliable than others (e.g., family, friends, media). A great deal of this information is incomplete, erroneous, and biased. In this context children tend to invent facts to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. I believe that they are therefore appreciative of being exposed to accurate knowledge on subjects considered volatile and often avoided by adults. They yearn for knowledge that comes from reliable sources. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 258)

The ERC course itself cannot be understood outside the context in which it was created. As Morris (2011) writes, "The ERC program does not stand in a vacuum. It is a logical outgrowth of the school curriculum officially designated as 'The Québec Education Program' (QEP)" (p. 191). It forms an integral part of the new QEP—an entirely new approach to curriculum in Québec in which ERC unquestionably fits. The ERC course is consistent with the goals of the program, the purpose of education which it presupposes, and the methods of integrating

new learning into the students' experience.

> The QEP is constituted by a series of school subjects like history, math, science, and ERC. It is, however, much more than a collection of disparate subjects. Each subject area in the QEP was elaborated with reference to common overarching objectives, a set of cross-curricular competencies, and what the Ministry referred to as ''broad areas of learning.'' (Morris, 2011, p. 191)

The QEP approaches learning in a non-traditional way. Instead of making the goal of school into achieving high test marks in traditional subject areas, it begins by stating fundamental goals of education and then outlines methods of meeting those goals. The main objectives of the QEP are explained in ministry documents:

> Helping students construct their world-view, construct their identity and become empowered are the three aims of the Québec Education Program. They provide a common direction for all educational measures and convey the sense that schools do more than give students academic tools; they also enable them to set goals for their lives and prepare them to contribute to society. (MELS, 2004, p. 6)

Following this structure the goals of learning are to come away not only with new information, but with skills that will allow for life-long learning and confidently finding one's place in society.

The two objectives of the ERC program specifically are the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good. In order to accomplish these goals the students are asked to develop three competencies: one in the area of religion, one in ethics, and one in dialogue. ERC lessons are meant to be integrative. Teachers can choose to teach ERC one hour a week on its own (though preferably relating to topics arising in the classroom already) or as part of other lessons like language or social studies classes.

The religion competency of the course is supposed to teach more than just comparative religion, it should situate that learning within a broader context. Here the students are asked to demonstrate "an understanding of the phenomenon of religion." The program guidelines require that each student "explores forms of religious expression, makes connections between forms of religious expression and the social and cultural environment, and considers different ways of thinking, being and acting" (MELS, 2008, p. 315). It is important that the student situates what they learn about religions within the context of their own life and the world around them:

> Living together in our society requires that we gain an understanding of the phenomenon of religion. In this program, the goal is to encourage students to understand the various forms of religious expression, grasp the complexity of the phenomenon and gain perspective on the various dimensions: experiential, historical, doctrinal, moral, ritual, literary, artistic, social or political. (MELS 2008, p. 315)

The ethics competency fills the void left by the loss of moral education in the Québec curriculum. Ethics has become a very popular, commonly taught subject in many parts of the world today. It is seen as a way of addressing the growing complexities of social issues, particularly with the advent of communication technologies that provide a constant flow of information from around the globe. It is an integrative topic that is frequently applicable to other subjects being explored in the classroom. De Silva, reflecting on her personal experiences in the classroom, writes:

> I have observed the value of teaching students how to do ethics and how to apply ethical questions to real-life situations. The skills of critical thinking involved in doing ethics correspond well with those taught in other domains, such as media awareness. Here students are taught to question

> who is sending which messages and for what purpose. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 259)

In this competency the students are asked to "reflect on ethical questions," taking into consideration a variety of perspectives and weighing the outcomes of actions. The ERC curriculum document explains: "This competency is based on three key features: identifies a situation from an ethical point of view, examines several cultural, moral, religious, scientific or social references, and evaluates options or possible actions" (MELS, 2008, p. 310).

Of the three competencies of the ERC course, dialogue—a section that is often overshadowed in public commentary by the more controversial areas of religion and ethics—is perhaps, in reality, the most salient piece of the program. It puts the knowledge gained about religions and ethics into practice. It challenges students to use what they've learned about religion and ethics in a way that is applicable to their day-to-day life in a plural society. Because the QEP places greater emphasis on the way learners use knowledge/skills/reflection rather than on the amount of curricular content they retain, the dialogue aspect of the course is as important, if not more so, in meeting the goals of the course, than the other two competencies. In the dialogue competency students are asked to develop three skills: organize their thinking, develop a point of view, and interact with others. An ERC curriculum document explains,

> ...the practice of dialogue entails adopting attitudes and behaviours that foster community life. Such dialogue involves two interactive dimensions: individual deliberation and the exchange of ideas with others. The first dimension, which promotes self-knowledge, requires moments of personal reflection. Such moments of reflection allow for examining a process, perceptions, preferences, attitudes and ideas, and for making connections with what is already known about a given topic. The second dimension,

> which enables encounters with the other, consists in taking time with others to share and explore, during which different points of view are constructed and expressed. (MELS, 2008, p. 320)

Anne-Marie De Silva, a Québec elementary school teacher, found that her grade six students reacted very positively to ERC, and the dialogue competency in particular.

> The ERC course puts the onus on the students themselves to internalize and apply the rules of dialogue as they appear in the program, thus freeing the teacher from the traditional role of arbitrator and referee. Ideally, with guidance and practice, students will be able to dialogue successfully without a teacher present, and thus will be free to practice these skills outside the classroom. This, naturally, has certain repercussions for adults in the students' lives. For example, a student recently commented to me that she has noticed how often her mother generalizes about others. In educating our children to think critically, recognize false arguments, question motivations, just to name a few, we are inviting them to become citizens that know how to question authority, a competency that is essential for democratic life. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 260)

The Ethics and Religious Culture program has met primarily with three areas of difficulty: points of ambiguity in the curriculum; teacher responses concerning desire and ability to teach the program; and media attention and public response.

Ambiguity

There have been some concerns that the ERC curriculum is either not yet developed enough, being a new program, or else deliberately ambiguous on some controversial issues, or both. Awkward areas that have been highlighted by scholars, teachers, and parents include moral relativism and subjectivity, and the

combining of religion and ethics (Kay, 2008; Gyapong, 2012). Some of these concerns are unjustified given the current philosophical underpinnings of the program and have only become widespread concerns because of miscommunication. Some are valid. Educational leaders and scholars have pointed out areas that have been left ambiguous, published summaries of underlying philosophical problems, and suggested reforms to the program that could address these problems in full.

A major objection to a non-doctrinal, sociological approach to religious instruction, especially as it relates to the teaching of religious and ethical ideas to children, is the danger of moral relativism. This is, in fact, one of the most common philosophical objections to the ERC program that has been highlighted in the media. In 2008 the *National Post* published an article entitled "Quebec's Creepy New Curriculum" that stated, "ERC was adopted by virtual fiat, its mission to instill 'normative pluralism' in students. 'Normative pluralism' is gussied-up moral relativism, the ideology asserting there is no absolute right or wrong and that there are as many 'truths' as there are whims" (Kay, 2008).

Relativism is the philosophical position which asserts that value systems are not absolute, but exist in relation to a cultural or personal context. Relativists claim that all positions are equally valid, and that there are no grounds on which to make judgments of value. Thus, the fear about relativism and ERC is that children will be taught that many different worldviews are simultaneously correct and that they may, as a result, lose their moral compass, feeling that their own religions or moral understandings are not secure or enduring, or even that holding

moral positions is pointless. This is to a great extent an exaggerated worry. "Relativism" should not be confused with "relativity": the latter is a framework that highlights the complexities that come from moral and religious understandings being attached to specific cultures and histories, whereas the former dismisses the importance of various value systems due to the plurality of views in a diverse society. In fact the ERC curriculum approaches the study of religion and ethics from a standpoint of relativity in the sense that it promotes exploration of the complex histories, cultures, philosophies that make up religions, focusing on the richness that our society has gained from the co-habitation of many religions.

Morris, in writing about the benefits of teaching ERC in a subjective, personal, reflective manner, explains that it is possible to achieve a style of instruction that supports personal reflection, drawing connections to one's own experiences and life, along with an understanding of values that support the common good, without relativism entering the picture at all.

He cites other religious education programs which endorse the use of the personal dimension in the classroom, writing that "The various 'stakeholders' involved in the development and implementation of the program also need to consider the religious education literature which sees the subjective-personal-interpretative dimension to the study of religion as compatible with the requirements of a democratic education" (Morris, 2011, p. 207).

When the ERC program description was first released, one goal of the ethics competency was for students to situate themselves personally with regard

to topics studied. This was changed in subsequent versions of the curriculum, creating ambiguity about how personally students are supposed to interact with their lessons, and whether or not these lessons should spark reflection about the students' own life and morality. Morris explains that the "subjective-personal-interpretative dimension" is extremely valuable to the study of ethics and religion.

> The initial formulation of the ethics competency did recognize the importance of the personal-subjective dimension of ethics. Both the policy document that preceded the program and the 2006 version of the ERC program described the ethics competency, not as "reflecting on ethical issues," but rather as "positioning oneself reflectively on ethical questions." In the original formulation of the competency the aim was to cultivate an ability to consider one's own life in relationship to broader ethical issues. Emphasis was explicitly placed on both the subjective and social world of learners. (Morris, 2011, p. 196)

He points out that the current ERC program introduces the "formal process of critical reflection on moral problems, issues, and norms" and ends there, without taking into account the ways these debates can nurture and enrich the students' own personal lives, without addressing personal flourishing and the ethics of "the good life." He adds:

> Moreover, the ERC program situates moral problems and issues within themes such as friendship, justice, happiness, freedom, the future of humanity, and human ambiguity. It is difficult to imagine how these rich and complex themes can be addressed without fostering substantive reflection on what it means to live a good life, for oneself and others. Students will inevitably make connections to their own lives. This is an inescapable component of human agency. The retreat from "the self who reflects on his/her place in the world" is all the more surprising considering that the program sees the "recognition of others" as "intrinsically connected to self-knowledge." (Morris, 2011, p. 197)

The combination of religion and ethics in one program can be seen as a natural one considering the historical evolution of religious and moral instruction

in Québec schools (though morality is no longer imposed through religious doctrine, there remains a need for children to explore value systems, both personal to them and adopted by the social and legal systems in which they live). It is also a sensible one considering the purpose for which the ERC program was created. The aim of promoting a more peaceful and harmonious religiously plural society depends both upon understanding the religious worldviews of others and taking actions that demand thoughtfulness about the complexities of morality—especially in cases where individual values come into conflict with social values. The combination of religion, ethics, and dialogue in one program seems appropriate given that religion and ethics frequently overlap in social issues (gay marriage, abortion, religious expression in the public sphere, etc.), and that dialogue is a necessary skill when dealing with both topics in a plural society.

An often-criticized problem with the inclusion of both religion and ethics within the same program, however, is that it is confusing to talk about the value systems held by various religions in a non-dogmatic manner, while also discussing the importance of upholding values held by modern democratic society. It harks back to the days when Christian dogma determined morality. There is concern that examining both together will deliver the confused message that we should follow values taught by various religions, which is akin to teaching doctrinal religion in the classroom.

The competency and background required to teach two individually challenging subjects in one course is much greater than teaching the two separately, since the combination is more confusing than each alone. Great

sensitivity is needed to guide students through these two disciplines effectively. As Morris points out, this demands thorough training and opportunities for practice which teachers are not currently receiving.

> Providing in-service and pre-service teachers with more university courses is clearly desirable. Simply providing more courses, however, is insufficient; especially considering that the ERC program ambitiously brings together two subject areas usually taught independently of each other. As it is, pre-service teachers tend to take their disciplinary courses in separate departments (usually religious studies and philosophy), and do so with very few opportunities to examine how to integrate the two areas. Worse still, some academics openly display hostility to the other area. Moreover, those teacher educators who contributed to the development of the previous secular moral education course are inclined to see the addition of a religion component as a step backward. These educators have difficulty seeing themselves in the new program. In addition to providing more courses and workshops, the success of this program will also rest on our capacity to provide an integrated formation, one that addresses problems relating to disciplinary boundaries and conflicting professional identities. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 263-264)

McDonough (2011) raises another point of ambiguity relating to the combination of religion and ethics. He writes that there is a basic conflict between two clear goals of the ERC program: promoting personal autonomy vs. promoting democratic civil virtues. He explains that the stated aims for ERC rest on the assumption that adopting social values like tolerance, respect, and understanding necessarily lead to personal flourishing, but it has not been taken into consideration that sometimes these two goals actually contradict each other. He gives the example of a classroom discussion of gay marriage, where the aims of the ERC course would simultaneously be to promote the virtues of democratic society like tolerance and support of the legal system which has approved the practice, and also to promote personal reflection which helps the student find her

personal moral, perhaps religious position, which might very well be in staunch opposition to the social one. The student is then torn, being influenced toward holding two contradictory positions (McDonough, 2011). It is a confusion which may necessitate a revision of program goals and curriculum, or which may simply require, as was seen with other points of curricular ambiguity, extensive training and skilled teaching in order to navigate complications of the program that are very much like the baffling complexities of life.

Media and the Public

Media coverage of the ERC program has posed another major obstacle to the program's success and acceptance. In some cases it has not only highlighted controversial aspects of the program, but also published falsities about its actual curriculum, creating greater discomfort about the program amongst the public.

The MLQ has been a powerful public voice against the program. Its influence, which has carried significant media sway since its formation in the 1960s, even despite limited membership, is a powerful one in Québec media. Given that its creation in 1961 "promoted a radical separation of church and state and a new concept of social cohesion based on language and culture" (Gauvreau, 2005, p. 248), it held the eradication of religion in schools as one of its primary goals for the secularization of Québec. It is not surprising that it is a very loud and public objector to the program. Morris describes the objections of the current

MLQ president:

> ...The new president of the Movement Laique Quebecois (MLQ) gave a public lecture arguing that the ERC program is nothing less than an ideological device designed to undermine the ideals and achievement of the Enlightenment. Here the continued presence of religion in Quebec public schools is perceived to undermine the very foundations of modernity and the goal of educating rational-autonomous citizens. In her lecture, the president of the MLQ also claims that the new program is an insult to the intelligence of teachers and an insult to the discipline of philosophy. (Morris, 2011, p. 189)

There remain bold public statements against the program on the current MLQ website. The new president, Marie-Michelle Poisson, for example, maintains that the program was created in secret by people who wished to promote their own beliefs and conserve the essence of confessional education:

> Ce programme a été conçu en vase clos, dans le plus mystérieux des secrets par des gens moins soucieux du bien commun que de la promotion de leurs propres intérêts corporatists ou de la promotion de leurs convictions personnelles. Des gens qui, au vu des erreurs, des incohérences et des graves lacunes relevées dans le programme sont ou bien des incompétents ou de sinistres manipulateurs qui se seraient évertués à « trouver de nouvelles façons de sauvegarder l'essentiel de la confessionnalité scolaire, tout en la faisant évoluer». (Poisson, n.d.)

Exaggerations arising from fear and lack of information about the program continue to persist today, six years after ERC's first implementation in schools. Morris writes about the court ruling that recently allowed Loyola High School to teach its own Catholic version of the ERC course—the first of the legal proceedings that ruled against the ERC course's mandatory implementation in its current form. The judge ruled that private schools in Québec have the right to offer an equivalent course that suits the traditions of the school. "The judge, however, did more than just present the legal justification for the decision. He

included a passage on the 'Supremacy of God' which appears in the preamble to the Canadian Constitution and added that the imposition of the ERC course is tantamount to the 'totalitarianism' of the 'Inquisition'" (Morris, 2011, p. 190). It is important to note that since that ruling the Ministry appealed the decision and Quebec Court of Appeal agreed with Ministry. Loyola is currently considering bringing the case to the Supreme Court of Canada.

The ERC course has become a symbol for the current place of religion in Québec society and as such its weaknesses are exaggerated, its existence demonized. Many fears that are thrust upon it are vigorous and passionate because they actually reflect much bigger fears about a society in transition, fears about whether the future will look like the past, about what the place of religion will be in our children's lives. Despite the challenges that the ERC program is being met with, it is a necessary and timely program, and is therefore being pushed ahead passionately by its supporters: the government and the Ministry of Education, scholars, philosophical and social commentators, and the principals and teachers who see its worth. As Morris writes, the program is being pushed ahead because it's not just a new school subject; it's a necessity in reshaping society:

> All Québec schools, whether public or private, must teach this program; and the program is required at all school levels; from Grade 1 to 11, with the exception of Grade 9. This state of affairs reflects the conviction that ERC is not just a school program. As was seen above, it is first and foremost a choice for a certain kind of society. It is part of a social and political project where respect for pluralism and democratic ideals are given priority. (Morris, 2011, p. 199)

Meanings of Secularism

Any discussion of the appropriate place of religion in the public sphere today must be based on some common understanding of the term "secularism." When the MLQ works to ensure a "secular" school system, they may be at odds with other groups who similarly want "secular" public education but who envision something very different. Without coming to a consensus about what we mean when we talk about hosting a secular society, social debate gets stuck at near insurmountable misunderstandings and miscommunications. It is difficult to engage in fruitful debate if we are working with radically different understandings of secularism. Is secularism about the freedom of religious expression for all within the public sphere? Does it imply a society free from religious belief altogether? Or does the term mean a society which tolerates the free practice of religion in private but in public only to a limited extent (and then the variations on "limited extent"), and so forth?

Throughout the last decade Québec citizens have been bombarded with debates in the media over specific religious accommodation concerns. Can a young girl wear a *hijab* with her soccer uniform? Is a refusal to permit it really

based on a concern for safety or is it an excuse for religious intolerance? Where and when is it permissible for a Sikh person to carry the *kirpan*? We find ourselves responding, sometimes passionately and sometimes with uncertainty, but frequently without awareness of a larger, well-though-out opinion about what the place of religion should be, or at most, we argue that we are on the side of "secularism" or of "religious tolerance"—both vague positions. It is too easy, in any debate over religion in the public sector, to reach for the life-raft of "secularism," which is assumed to be a guiding principle of Western society, as if it is a magical value that ensures freedom by placing religion right where it should be—but where is that?

Based on an examination of social media and the current religious accommodation debate there would appear to be a growing assumption that by "secular" what is meant is a complete absence of religion to the point that, while the practice of religion is permitted, it is expected to be hidden within the walls of the private home or building of worship—and it must not slip too far outside those walls and encroach on the freedom of others. In fact, the conventional working definition seems to be rapidly falling away in common public usage. Charles Taylor points this out in much of his published work about secularism.

> "At least in the USA, the separation of religion and the state was initially conceived of as a way of preventing any single faith being imposed on the other believers who made up society. The aim was not so much to drive religion out of the social sphere as to protect its diversity. Religion's withdrawal from public life was not a necessary part of this vision." Yet somehow, we have come to see that separating the church and state necessitates a total withdrawal of religion into the private realm of the home. (Taylor quoted in Abbey, 2004, p. 195-196)

Spencer Boudreau, discussing a document created by the Catholic committee in the late 1970s, addresses the same point with regard to Québec society in particular:

> "Secularization refers to the historical process whereby society and culture free themselves from the custody of religious authority." In this sense, Quebec has evidently been secularized, stated the committee, and this should not be seen as a negative process. However, secularism also has the connotation of a worldview where religion, spirituality, and God are absent because the modern world has evolved from a need for metaphysical phenomena. (Boudreau, 1999, p. 36)

Charles Taylor, in his thorough philosophic work on secularism today, *A Secular Age*, begins by proposing that there are three basic, broadly defined types of secularism in which various models of the ideal secular society could be categorized. The first is the separation of church and state, according to which it is possible to live and work in a society without any specific personal religious belief being necessary for one's political or social participation. "One understanding of secularity then is in terms of public space. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality" (Taylor, 2007, p. 2). He explains that this model can be understood through spheres of activity—each becoming separate from each other—in contrast to the historic norm of religion holding sway over other areas of life. The purpose of going to school then is to acquire a general education, not for the betterment of one's soul. "…[T]he considerations we act on are internal to the 'rationality' of each sphere—maximum gains within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political arena, and so on" (Taylor, 2007, p. 2).

The second definition of secularism involves people losing interest and/or belief in religion. “In this second meaning, secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to church” (Taylor, 2007, p. 2). Though the result is a similar movement of religious expression out of the public arena, this is a vastly different phenomenon from the first definition (with which it is often used interchangeably, to some confusion), and one which is very recent when viewed relatively within the course of human history.

Taylor’s third definition combines the first and second to some extent; it is a richer definition that speaks to the complexity of belief, and it serves as his working definition as he posits that it much more accurately portrays the untidiness of the current move toward secularity in modern society. “The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (Taylor, 2007, p. 3). This phenomenon leads to a wide variety of ways of moving away from religion, as people embrace other, often easier, options.

One difficulty in the debate about secularism today is the focus on the particulars of the first model—determining the ways that religion should be exited from public space, without recognition of the complexity of the third model: a society that is experiencing a full spectrum of reactions to new conditions of religious belief. Jumping to what is seen as the quicker, simpler, more practical solution of removing religion from the public arena simply cannot be reconciled

with the difficult and messy situation of a public that is struggling to come to terms with new religious realities. Faced with the baffling complexity of the reality of the religious landscape today, religious education is commonly presented as a first step in moving toward a lasting and concrete religious tolerance. This education would hopefully move us closer to the ability to experience the religious freedom that springs from mutual appreciation and respect rather than from the absence of contact with religions. However, this relationship between religious education and secularism becomes overwhelmingly controversial when viewed from Taylor's first working definition of secularism, the movement out of the public arena, because then the practice of religious education, especially within the public school system, is seen as a move backwards, as bringing religion back into the public space once more.

There is also some concern among academics and social commentators about the perceived oppressiveness of secularism. A growing part of the debate on modern secularism is the question of whether secularism itself has become the "new religion." Here the contention of secularism that religion contaminates public spaces becomes so restricting that it seriously undermines freedom of expression. This was a major accusation against traditional religious power structures, something that proponents of this more restrictive secularism were trying to avoid in the first place. This concern is related to the idea of ridding the public arena of religion, resulting in the kind of secularism where no religious presence is allowed within any shared space. A secularism that sees religious symbols in the public domain as offensive encourages a form of secularism that

seriously undermines religious freedom (one main purpose of facilitating a secular society in the first place). Here a total absence of religion cultivates a sense of religion as mysterious and frightening. A secularism that completely banishes religion from public spaces risks demonizing the "other". The challenge, as Kearney (2003) argues, is rather "to become more mindful of who the other is" (p. 18).

A dangerous situation occurs when people combine their fears over the endangering of language and French culture with their position on religion/secularity. We do not want social religious policy to simply be a reaction out of fear. It is within this kind of confusion that minority groups are at worst demonized and at best asked to conform to traditional Québécois culture, their own identities suppressed to the point of vanishing. It is unreasonable to expect that such a suppression of human identity will not have repercussions within Québec society later on. Considering the vast minority population within Québec today, it is crucial that we recognize and welcome the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds that have shaped the new population. The only sustainable way to real "accommodation"—that is, a society that fosters respect and the celebration of diversity—is through open communication and education about the cultures, experience**,** and worldview of those we live with.

The ERC program has been created to facilitate this kind of education. Not only does it present world religions in such a way that students can begin to understand the religious practices of those they see around them all day, it is tailored specifically to the religious and educational history of Québec. While the

ERC program is often mistakenly viewed as a move backwards, toward the old confessional school system, or a sudden new project to embrace world religions that sprang out of the blue, in actuality the course is a natural outcome of the evolution of the religion in Québec schools, reflecting the need of the current population.

Chapter Three: The Implications of ERC and Ways Forward

Teacher Responses

Teacher responses in general are one of the greatest difficulties the ERC program has met with. Since teachers will be the ones directly interacting with the students it is they, not the creators of the course or the curriculum writers, who will determine the culture of the course, and the attitude with which students approach it, and it is they who will have direct contact with parents in moments of success and moments of controversy. They are an extremely important element of the success of the program—arguably the most important pillar. Since the

implementation of the program some teachers have been very excited about the potential for ERC and the many wonderful and meaningful learning opportunities it creates in the classroom. They cite students who are drawing deep and meaningful connections between themselves and others, who are sensitive and thoughtful and passionate as they learn about religions they have not understood before; these teachers point to the ERC course as a rich platform from which many special teachable moments spring (Van der Wee, 2011; De Silva, 2011). Many other teachers, however, have expressed their frustration at being asked to teach yet another new program, after decades of curriculum reforms in Québec—a program for which they do not feel qualified as its complexity should require a degree in religion/morality/philosophy. They have also expressed their fear of inadvertently angering parents, or of having to defend their subject content or methods to parents who have more experience or expertise in areas of religion than the teachers themselves.

A 2010 survey of seventy-five elementary teachers from various regions of Québec[3] found that the majority of teachers (53.3%) support the idea of the program, that a smaller but significant number of teachers (18.7%) don't support the program, and that a surprisingly large group (28%) feel that nothing has changed since the implementation of the new program; it also found that, with regard to the religion component, there is a dichotomy between teachers who value openness to all cultures and teachers who value the honouring of traditional Québécois identity and culture. Bouchard writes about the survey's findings:

[3] Conducted by N. Bouchard with M. Gagnon and J.-C. Desruisseaux, Research Group on Ethics Education and Ethics in Education.

> [T]hose who favor the "religious culture" component do so in terms of a gain in openness toward other cultures. Those who respond negatively to the religion component justify their response in terms of a loss of "our" Québec culture (Christian, especially Catholic). The two justifications mutually exclude each other. None of those who responded favorably to the religious culture component referred to the importance of Québec's religious heritage. Similarly, none of the respondents who responded unfavorably to the religion component referred to the importance of openness to other cultures. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 261)

This was significantly different than what had been found by an earlier MELS study.

> The 2007 MELS report indicates that the teachers manifested considerable interest in the program, but that this interest is accompanied by "a need for information and teaching material on the religious culture component of the program." According to the different groups surveyed (teachers, pedagogical consultants, administrators), the content, the pedagogical context, and the competencies "do not raise difficulties." According to a consultation report following the second trial year (2009), all the teachers who participated "perceive the program favourably because the learning revolves around dialogue, life in society, and an openness to different cultures and to students in the class." (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 261)

The studies are promising in part but also show some troubling responses. First, they indicate that teachers may not be as open to, supportive of, or confident about ERC as was originally found by MELS in their study. Secondly, teachers' views on the religion aspect of the program in particular are polarized, with a split between those who support the basic philosophy of teaching openness about other cultures and those who support a philosophy of preserving traditional culture and Québécois identity. Thirdly, the studies suggest that the indifference with which a large percentage of teachers are approaching the program may show it is not being delivered effectively in many classrooms.

In my personal interactions with student-teachers who performed their

field experiences in 2010 and 2011 in elementary schools in Montreal and the surrounding areas, I heard numerous accounts of student-teachers having very little idea about what ERC is because their teacher-mentors devoted minuscule amounts of time to it, or ignored it altogether. On two occasions student-teachers reported that their teacher-mentor logged time spent on ERC for normal classroom management and behavioural issues, counting commonplace discussions of being kind to one another, not calling each other names, etc., as a discussion of ethics and dialogue. In a classroom of seventy-five student-teachers, only one reported having a teacher-mentor who was enthused about ERC and spent time creating detailed LES's for it. It was noted that this teacher was a new, young, highly enthusiastic teacher at the beginning of her career. The scenario raises an important point about the nature of the QEP and the freedom it grants to teachers. It simultaneously allows teachers to ignore some elements of the legally mandatory curriculum without it being noticed, and is also the kind of pedagogical freedom on which the success of ERC depends: an assumption that teachers are knowledgeable and professional enough to structure their own lessons, to focus on whichever elements they see as important for the particular students they are working with.

One of the strengths of the QEP is the autonomy it grants to teachers. This is highly divergent from a problematic trend in North American schools in the past century. Teachers have slowly devolved from professionals who are socially regarded as highly skilled, knowledgeable, and able, to instructors trained in delivering a government-created curriculum, closely observed to ensure they do

not divert students from this track. The QEP marks a shift from the commonly held current view that teachers are simply those who deliver pre-determined course content to students in a pre-determined fashion. A foundational premise of the QEP is that teachers are highly skilled, "cultured" professionals. This position allows teachers the freedom to tailor topics studied to the needs of their particular students, and to deliver lessons in a creative, effective manner. A course like ERC, with its extremely broad yet specific subject matter, its reliance on the individual experiences of the students, and its emphasis on personal reflection absolutely depends on the dynamism and autonomy of the teacher. It surely could not be effective delivered in the form of cookie-cutter lesson plans in which a teacher-instructor is asked to convey only specific information following a specific time line.

On the other hand, we are asking teachers to perform a Herculean task**.** We cannot expect them to lead ERC classes which touch on many world religions, each rich and unique, and to integrate these lessons with ones on the complexities of ethics, while relating these philosophical and social points back to the learners' personal experience and guiding them in their practice of dialogue. Considering that most of these teachers have never undergone an in-depth study of religion or ethics, asking them to prepare lessons on the topic is a major request. If a teacher has very little background in mathematics—let's say only a minor preparatory class during teachers' college—and needs to present a lesson on a mathematical concept with which he is unfamiliar, he may simply learn that concept in isolation and still be able to effectively teach it to his students, and be

prepared for the natural questions which will arise during that lesson. A teacher may prepare for a lesson in the beliefs of a given religion, and study all she can about it. However, there is no way for her to prepare answers to questions about that religion, similarities and differences with other traditions, or ways in which students have personally experienced various aspects of that, or similar, or differing religious expression. The vision of the ideal ERC class is extremely dynamic. It relies on the personal and varied thoughts and experiences of its students. It is an exploration. However, if teachers are under-trained and afraid (perhaps legitimately, considering the sensitive religious climate of current-day Québec) of the subject matter the course introduces, where will they find the confidence with which to lead such an exploration? The QEP has addressed the impossibility of teachers being experts in religion and ethics by stating that teachers will learn methods of leading discussions and strategies for effective ways to learn and explore alongside the students, rather than trying to learn enough information to give lectures, which suits the style of teaching and learning built into the QEP anyway. However**,** there is much concern that the amount of training that a teacher would need to feel confident and capable even in *that* scenario is lacking.

Morris, writing that teacher formation may be the Achilles heel of the program, explains that,

> In the teacher education program at my institution, ERC in secondary education can only be taken as a minor. This translates into a total of 18 academic or disciplinary credits—6 courses in all. In the elementary program the few students who specialize in ERC take five disciplinary courses. Most students, however, take one curriculum course and one disciplinary course. Most in-service teachers have very little background

> in the area, except perhaps for a workshop or two on the program. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 263)

He also explains that,

> The Ministerial Orientations on teacher formation argue that teachers ought to have a breadth of knowledge and an appreciation for the history and culture of a particular discipline. Here the "cultured teacher" is able to connect the material to the student's life and situate that material in its larger cultural contexts. For the ERC program this means that teachers should have an appreciation for how ethics and religion shapes the world we live in. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 263)

Anne-Marie De Silva, writing of her experiences leading training workshops on how to teach ERC, found that teachers were afraid

> …of opening up situations they could not control, of upsetting parents, of confusing or influencing the students in their religious understandings, of not knowing enough about different religious traditions in order to teach them. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 260)

As part of her response she explained to them that the course relies on a style of instruction in which children are not assumed to be empty vessels and teachers bearers of all knowledge, but rather all classroom members are seen as teachers and learners. The ERC course is meant to be an exploration by students and teacher together. Teachers therefore don't have to be experts in all religions. The nature of the course itself relies on everyone knowing a little bit and sharing personal experience, not on a single expert, because the goal of the program is to enhance dialogue rather than have children simply memorize facts about various religions (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011).

Unexpected challenges continue to complicate this approach, however. Teachers have reported difficulties with this method when they lead classes about religions in schools in some areas on the outskirts of Montreal, where 90%–100%

of students are of the same religion, often Muslim, and the teacher's personal background is of another religious tradition. In smaller, particularly northern, townships where 90%–100% of the students are Catholic, similar difficulties arise. While the QEP curriculum guidelines might state that the teacher's role in ERC is to facilitate and guide a learning scenario in which all players, him/herself included, are equal-footed explorers, the reality of the day-to-day classroom presents challenging, intimidating situations. With culturally, religiously homogeneous groups of students there is the added challenge of sparking curiosity and especially open-mindedness toward other traditions, and of finding opinions divergent enough to allow for classroom debate. There is also the challenge of the teacher feeling completely intimidated by the class's lived experience of a religion which he has not personally encountered, not to mention the added skill level necessary to manage debate and balanced expressions of viewpoints when a small minority of the class comes from a different tradition than the vast majority.

My personal experience with the ERC program has been, most directly, with pre-service teachers who are about to start teaching the program in elementary classrooms. During the completion of my Master's degree at McGill University I was a T.A. for the mandatory 3-credit/half-semester course in ERC training, with an enrollment of seventy-five students. Luckily, thanks to a background in religious studies, I was given a large amount of responsibility for the course, helping to organize course content and scheduling, delivering lectures, and having a great deal of personal interaction with the students. As was

mentioned earlier, the majority of these teachers had completed their field work without seeing the teacher-mentor teach an ERC class. They were curious and terrified about what they were going to be asked to teach in ERC as new teachers.

Coming into the class there was a lot of prejudice against the course, opinions that it was morally wrong to impose a course on religions on school children, and much confusion and misunderstanding about what the course actually is. The negative portrayal of the ERC course in the media had strongly influenced the students' perception of the program. Once the nature of the course was made clear, that it is not an imposition of belief systems, nor is it a threat to the foundation of the children's religious beliefs in their home and family life, that it really is meant to be an exploration of personal experiences in a religiously plural society, facilitated in a very open and fair way, enthusiasm for the course grew quickly.

The short training was filled with explanations of the nature of the course, its genesis and historical evolution, its purpose and necessity; overviews of the curriculum, logistics of what topics to teach when and how frequently; demonstrations of methods and activities to encourage and manage respectful dialogue, having the students create LES's (Learning & Evaluation Situations), give practice lessons, use the copious resource lists that we provided them; and finally, lessons with as much information about ethics and world religions as we could fit in. Unfortunately, there simply is not time in a three-credit course to give actual instruction in various religious traditions or even in the philosophical foundation of ethics. It was all we could do to impart the ways and means of

approaching the topic, and provide them with as many resources as possible so that they could learn on their own, rather than teaching them the actual content they would need to be teaching the following year.

Despite growing excitement about the wonderful potential the course has for developing a classroom culture of sharing and thoughtfulness, student-teachers' fears about their ability to effectively teach the course persisted. Regardless of the skills they acquired to help them lead discussions that depended upon their students' own research and personal experience, they expressed many fears about entering the situation of leader in the classroom without enough knowledge of world religions. The specifics of how we chose to address this fear and support the student-teachers are discussed in the following chapter. Whether or not we were successful, however, is irrelevant to the widespread feedback that education students are feeling overwhelmed and under-trained to deliver ERC effectively, even in situations where they are excited about the course and really want it to succeed in their classrooms.

Learning to Teach ERC

During my work with the seventy-five student-teachers in their ERC training class I was exposed to the many fears and confusions new teachers have as they are asked to teach the ERC program. The students were in the last semester of their BEd degrees at McGill University and had completed their fieldwork. It was the

winter semester and they would be graduating and hoping to find teaching positions in their own elementary classrooms in September. On the first day of class the widespread ignorance about the new program was illustrated all too clearly—the course instructor and I were certainly prepared for some lack of knowledge about what the course is, given that it is such a new program, but not the overwhelming misconceptions that the students held about what the course is. Though there were a few excited exceptions, most entered the classroom with reluctance and very little interest in the mandatory last course they had to complete in order to receive their degree. The first thing they were asked to do was to write down everything they knew about the ERC course and why they thought the course was either important or not important. There were five responses that illustrated knowledge and excitement about the new course but they were the exception. The others ranged from clear admissions of their own lack of knowledge about the program to answers that tried to diminish, yet still illustrated, their prejudices against the course. Not surprisingly they noted many of the commonly held arguments against the course used by media and parent and religious groups, including erroneous ones. There was clear concern that the ERC course was bringing religion back into the classroom from which it had finally been removed, which some students felt was morally unjust, and a step backward in the province that had worked so hard to separate church and school. There were fears from religious students that their own religion would be taught inaccurately by teachers who had no personal knowledge of it, thus spreading ignorance to followers of that religion and others alike.

We proceeded with an elementary introduction to the ERC course. We talked about why it was created, the historical context from which it arose, and its goals. We clarified the difference between confessional and non-confessional study of religion. It was an overwhelming reminder of the power of education. In less than an hour, after a simple and straightforward explanation of the program, many of the students who entered the class with grave concerns about the nature of the program were placated and interested to learn more.

Once we were able to move beyond the resistance toward the course itself and the students began to think about themselves teaching the program we were met with many more fears. These we were more prepared for. Given the current religion-sensitive climate in Québec, where religion is rarely openly spoken about outside the family group, hesitations arise even in broaching the subject with one's peers. We do not discuss religion with our friends of differing religious beliefs, and sometimes not even with those of the same beliefs. There are commonly harboured fears of accidentally saying something offensive, of embarrassment about our own lack of knowledge, of hearing something that might offend our own sensibilities.

We addressed fear. Fear of one's own ignorance was the predominant issue as it included fear of unwittingly offending others, as well as fear of the embarrassment of knowing too little to hold prolonged conversations with others. We spent a great deal of time on introspection about the root of our fears, and discussion about the prevalence of fear over talking about religion in public, and especially in schools. The students were reassured by the fact that they even if

they tried, it would never be possible for them to know everything about religions, even one religion; that even among two experts in the same religion there is endless debate about basic truths of doctrine; that, in fact, the ERC curriculum has been created not only assuming that they as teachers won't know everything, but counting on it, as it asks them not to teach informational lectures, but rather to introduce ideas and then guide students in their own research, in the sharing of their own experiences and thoughts.

Moving on to teaching methods for the course we focused strongly on the use of stories. The students started teaching each other about the religious backgrounds they grew up with (including secular spirituality, atheism, and scientific humanism) through telling one another their favourite religious story from childhood. They then discovered that each story displayed a value that had made them love the story to begin with and that was also a fundamental value on which the religion placed great importance. I gave an example of a Jain story that illustrated peacefulness contrasted with a Sikh story that illustrated valour. Both stories, like so many we cherish in childhood, were wonderfully captivating. The morals of both stories were in contradiction with each other, one glorifying the courage and power it takes to be truly non-violent, and one glorifying the bravery and strength it takes to stand up and fight for something good when the odds are against you. Yet, everyone could deeply appreciate both values. Stories give us context from which to understand a larger, more intangible philosophical standpoint. They are also a jumping-off point from which we can explore the diversity of symbols, rituals, traditions of each religion in a context which we can

relate to, respect, and admire. We used the knowledge of the power of stories, of the connections that can be made through values, of ways to link these values to a diversity of symbols, rituals, traditions, as we moved on to the creation of LES's, understanding curriculum documents and evaluation methods, locating resources, etc.

At the end of the course we asked the students to again answer, anonymously, what they know about ERC and whether they think ERC is important or not. The responses that came back were in stark contrast to the ones on the first day. Students expressed a profound appreciation of the purpose of the course. They were still nervous about teaching it, but they understood more of what was expected of them, and no longer felt it was morally unjustified for them to be asked to teach ERC. Many were excited about the challenge and about the opportunities the subject provides for rich teachable moments.

It was only a partial success. We found that there wasn't enough time to actually teach the students about religions themselves. We spent about half our class time getting the student-teachers on board with the course and helping them to overcome fears about teaching it, and the other half providing resources and doing practice lessons that relied on finding resources so that they would know how to find what they would need later to prepare classes. There wasn't time to provide backgrounds in various religions themselves, and so the student-teachers by default are expected to learn what they need to know about religions on their own time. Because of this, the course was not able to equip the student-teachers with the full knowledge and confidence they really need to deliver the course

effectively. When teaching, ERC teachers cannot draw on their own past education as they can for subjects like English, math, history; most of them have never studied world religions, or even their own religion in a non-confessional manner. We have created a new course that, in order to be successful, demands more education then we are providing. It will be effective delivery of the course which will ripple into students having good experiences, which will lead to parents supporting the course, and finally the media following suit. This all depends upon teachers, and so we must invest in supporting them, preparing them, more thoroughly.

At the elementary level, at both English and French universities, only one 3-credit curriculum course is offered to prepare student teachers for ERC, and there is a definite need for more training. At the secondary level, however, the situation is a bit better. For students in English universities, like McGill and Bishop's, ERC is grouped into the English or History streams and students planning on teaching ERC opt to take course in world religions as part of their degree. (McGill University, Bishop's University) French universities in Quebec are definitely leading the way, however, with Université du Québec à Montréal and Université de Montréal offering a teaching degree specializing in ERC, and offering a wide range of mandatory and elective courses spanning theories of ethics and world religions at the secondary level. (Université du Québec à Montréal, Université de Montréal) It should be noted however, that even in the case of specializing in ERC for secondary schools at these universities, the background courses in ethics and religions are taken through the departments of

philosophy and religion, not through the education department. What is lacking is an in-depth training about how to teach world religions to students in the current religious climate of Quebec, and about how to skillfully honour students' lived experiences of ethics and religions, making lessons meaningful, interactive, and often, student-led.

It is worth investing in increased teacher training for ERC because the course can be so deeply beneficial to both society and students as individuals. Programs like ERC are of paramount importance in the world today because school is the testing ground where young people practice with their peers the social and communication skills they will use with everyone with whom they interact throughout their lives. By giving students the safe space of the classroom to explore religious identities, to discover on their own the similarities and differences they have with their peers, we allow them to live un-fragmented lives. As Anne-Marie De Silva points out, writing about her personal experiences with the course, in providing this kind of safe space ERC leads directly to increased knowledge, sharing, and respect for others:

> For those increasing number of students who follow minority religions in Québec, such as Islam or Hinduism, I have observed how this program provides an opportunity to validate and share a piece of their religious identity that was previously denied by the school curriculum. These students often experience a strong sense of disconnection between their home lives and the school system, where either no mention of their religious traditions is made or where they are presented as abstract ideas unconnected to real people. Unlike past confessional religion classes, which necessitated dividing the children according to their religious traditions, this course builds on the diversity in the classroom. This allows all students to share as much or as little as they would like of their own experiences with one another. I have found that this opportunity has allowed the students to gain further respect for one another, especially

> when they realize the wealth of knowledge and information there is to be discovered in diverse groups. (Morris, Bouchard, & De Silva, 2011, p. 259)

Supporting Teachers for the Program's Success

Because the ERC program holds so much potential value for Québec society it is important to identify and offer the kind of support that will allow it to flourish, to do what it was created to do. The nature of the program is such that the attitude and skill-set of the teacher is the most influential aspect of a good ERC class. In order for students to embrace it, in order for a safe space to be created which will allow for multi-religious exploration in the classroom, teachers must embrace the idea of the program and acquire the skills needed to lead it effectively.

As has already been explored, teachers have mixed feelings about the program. While it will never be possible to convince everyone of the value of ERC, or find complete agreement on the best teaching approaches for the topic, certainly education can calm many fears, can clarify misinformation about the content of the program, can transform understandings of why the program is beneficial to Québec society. As we have seen in the past with new and socially controversial topics being introduced into the school system (a perfect example is sex education), what is at first widely viewed as inappropriate for the public realm of the school, with time and education can become widely accepted and prized as extremely beneficial for society.

The best way to ensure the ERC program's success is to improve the

teacher formation we offer, both in terms of quantity and of quality. Considering that the program offers a style of religious education which has not been widely offered in public school in Québec before, and therefore has not been part of teacher education programs before, we would be wise to look to pre-existing models of teacher formation for multi-religious education classes.

No matter what official policies on teaching approaches for ERC are decided upon or what curriculum documents are created, it is the small details of how to handle the daily classroom situations, unique to ERC, that lead to the ability to teach this new subject effectively, and they come with time and experience. Learning from the insights of researchers in places where a similar kind of religious education has been taught in public schools for years will allow us to avoid common mistakes, and bring us further in the evolution of our teaching approaches, more quickly.

The United Kingdom is a leader in this area because, like many European countries, they have been offering Religious Education as non-confessional multi-religious studies since 1988. Julia Ipgrave is a leader in the field, writing and teaching about how to effectively teach RE.

She explains the complexity of teaching a subject like religion, writing that it is a subject that demands a greater sophistication of teaching approaches then does a subject that can be taught merely through the use of curriculum guidelines. For example, unlike a traditional academic program, Religious Education requires an openness on the part of the teacher to be able to accept and learn from a student's response about religious experiences, traditions, and

understandings which might stand in contradiction to curriculum resources. Students may have many different lived experiences of styles of worship, or of understandings of the reasons for their own religious practices that conflict with the factual information the teacher has about that religion. It is the teacher who sets the tone of the class, and the classroom culture. It is after the teacher's example that the students model their response to new religious and cultural information; it is according to the teacher's reaction to their students' lived-experiences that students decide how open and honest to be.

> The nature of religion is such, however, that a simple curriculum choice of faith traditions to study is not enough to ensure religious inclusion in class. Religion is individual and personal, as well as communal. Religious traditions are internally diverse and culturally complex…. A child's experience of their religion may be very different from its portrayal in curriculum resources. Being presented with a representation of their religion in terms they do not recognize can be confusing for young children, and annoying for older students. (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 115)

The teacher's response to this confusion or annoyance is what can transform a sticky new subject in the classroom into a rich opportunity for open-ness, sharing, and learning from each other. Ipgrave notes an observation of such an opportunity that was missed because of a moment of lack of skill on the part of the teacher:

> In another class, a teacher asked about the symbolism of the open-handed gesture used in Muslim prayer. A Muslim boy, eager to share his insider knowledge, replied that it was so an angel could be supported on each hand. His answer opened up a rich seam of interest in supernatural beings, of links between a spiritual and material world, that a brave and imaginative teacher could have tapped. In this lesson, however, the explanation was ignored, and the class taught that the gesture represented 'openness to God'. The boy did not offer further contributions to the lesson. (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 115)

There will often be confusion on the part of the students about what to answer, how honest to be, how much to draw from their own lived experience and how much should instead be drawn from lessons and texts provided by their teacher "because they are unsure of what answer is acceptable in the classroom RE context" (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 116). The nature of the class is that it relies as much on classroom culture to promote participation as it does on curricular content.

Ipgrave provides four rules which she uses as a starting point when setting the right tone for a new class in religious education. She has all members of the class agree together to honour each of them: "1. Respect each other's religion. 2. Talk and think seriously about differences. 3. Listen to what other people say. 4. Be ready to learn new things even about your own religion" (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 117). She also suggests practical methods for easing the common problems that arise in a classroom made up of various religions but with strong predominance of one single religion. She recommends arranging a lesson around a common theme (prayer, journeys, social justice, the example of creation stories), or around an alternation of insider and outsider perspectives on the religion.

> If the class is studying the faith tradition to which a number of the children belong, it would be appropriate to make use of their experiences and understandings. In the interests of a religiously inclusive classroom, however, the teacher has to be careful not to divide her pupils into experts and non-experts. One way of tackling this problem is to set up an alternation of insider and outsider perspectives on the religion. (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 116)

These methods, however, are not simple and straightforward if they are not combined with thorough teacher education and practice. Ipgrave is clear that they have come with many years of experience of teaching religious education.

Creating an open and safe space in the classroom, which is a major goal of ERC, takes a great deal more skill than does preparing information-based lessons.

> One of the most successful secondary lessons I have observed was where a class of mainly Muslim teenagers debated at length different interpretations of *jihad* (holy war or spiritual struggle), giving space (within the security of the classroom) to a wide variety of Muslim and non-Muslim understandings. All too often RE shies away from such areas of controversy and disagreement to emphasise a shared core of common values or take refuge in a purely descriptive approach to other traditions. (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 117)

It takes tremendous courage and comfort on the part of the teacher to bring such a divisive issue to the classroom. Both courage and comfort come with experience and extensive education which allows the teacher to become more confident. Since we are just beginning the ERC program in Québec and discovering problematic areas of the course now, we can learn much from experts like Ipgrave who have been learning about how to teach these programs effectively for years. To assume that providing curriculum documents and short training programs to teachers will prepare them to be effective in teaching this deeply important and richly complex program would be a mistake.

Conclusion

Not all Quebecers view the ERC program as a step forward. Because the movement away from religious authority during the Quiet Revolution in many ways assisted Québec's evolution to a modernized society, respected on the world stage, people are afraid of reintegrating religion—in any form—into an institution as fundamental as the education system. The nature of the ERC course, however, is not only a radical departure from the confessional religious education of the past, but a step forward to a completely new way of understanding religion in the classroom. Because it focuses on improving dialogue skills and promoting knowledge of and harmony with the "other," it helps to prepare students to be refined, highly skilled, active members of a pluralist society, a world made smaller by instant world-wide communication, and a global economy. This is more effective than taking religion out of the education process altogether.

The ERC program must be viewed within its context. Opposing the program because one is generally opposed to the idea of teaching about religions in schools is an unfair oversimplification of a very sophisticated program. While it is true that the program is in its infancy, a time for identifying weaknesses and making improvements, it is not a political wild card that has been thrust upon

schools without a deeply thought out, rational, and carefully constructed curriculum. It has arisen as the result of comprehensive research about current social relations in Québec in order to respond to a societal need for increased harmony and understanding in the area of cultural and religious integration.

When controversial topics arise in education it is beneficial, in the midst of the raucous debate, to continually re-situate the debate within the framework of what we believe the purpose of education to be. Education has taken on a much greater role in our society than simply ensuring students learn the skills necessary to be employable. We have given it more value than that, tied it to the well-being and development of our children. If we believe that the purpose of education includes creating a happier, more harmonious society, then clearly programs like ERC can have tremendous value. As Sri Sri Ravi Shankar writes,

> The need of the day is a broad-minded education accompanied by a warm and caring heart. The function of education is to teach one to think critically—where intelligence comes with character. It is of no use if one acquires good education and then begins to look down upon others—or just engage in building wealth for oneself. A well-educated person is one who is friendly and compassionate, and is capable of selfless action. A complete education is one which empowers an individual to play the role of a global citizen in making the local community stronger and the world a safer and happier place to live. (Shankar, 2010, May 19)

ERC is a concrete, practical beginning to addressing the need for increased appreciation and understanding of the variety of religions in our plural society. It is the first large-scale program of its kind in North America. Québec can become a leader on the world stage in education because of the ERC program—but only if Québec society can embrace it enough to have intelligent, well-informed debate

about it, identifying the truly weak areas so that it can continually improve and grow stronger.

No matter what improvements we hope to make to the program, however, in order for the underlying philosophy and curriculum to be practically applied successfully, teachers must be understood as a fundamentally important piece of the program. Teacher education for the program must be improved, and support for teachers must be provided. We are not making a small change to the curriculum with ERC—we are implementing something new and big, a new way of thinking about religion in Québec. Throughout history, schoolteachers have had enormous influence in bringing social change. In the case of ERC, too, ultimately it will be the teachers who will determine its success.

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