

IS IT TIME FOR ONE SCHOOL SYSTEM ONLY?

A recent Leader Post commentary, in the wake of the educational tax restructuring in the province, stated that “*huge advantages would be gained from a single public education system*”. What “advantages” (presumably financial only) and how “huge”, are certainly debatable, but what the writer completely ignored was the rationale behind a society making provisions for separate schools.

The fact is that Catholic Education has always had its detractors, and always will. Anti-religious bias, and even outright bigotry will not disappear soon, if ever. But the question remains: “Would society be better served by one public education system only?” I don’t think so, and here’s why.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees under Fundamental Freedoms, the freedom of religion. (2, a) At the same time, the law of the land compels parents to send their children to school. The question then is: can Catholics exercise their constitutional freedom of religion if parents were to have only one option in the area of publicly funded education? The answer is no. The reason is that all schools teach “religion” whether they acknowledge it or not. If at the schools children would then be compelled to attend, the religious views and beliefs being taught are contrary to their own, then their fundamental right to freedom of religion will have been violated.

The argument goes like this:

All schools must form the minds and characters of children if they are to educate and any effort at such formation flows from a source of values. These values, particularly the ultimate ones, are in essence what constitute a religion. That is why atheism, secular humanism, paganism, scientism, legal positivism, (all non-theistic world views) are considered to be religions in and of themselves. They are so because they eliminate the supernatural – for Catholics the transcendent being from whom all truth and being originates – and take the place of conventional religion in one’s life.

One writer explained it this way: *“One’s ultimate concern, one’s way of valuing most intensively and comprehensively, the source of one’s deeply held conscientious convictions is one’s religion, whether one belongs to any church, engages in any conventional religious practices, or even thinks of oneself as religious.”*

Can schools maintain religious neutrality as they carry out their work? Well, perhaps some subjects could be neutralized (e.g. pure mathematics, physics, computer operations, spelling) but most cannot be sterilized of a religious undertone because almost everything in a culture worth transmitting is saturated with religious influences. How could a school possibly teach topics such as these in a religiously neutral manner: the Reformation, the Inquisition, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (History); reproduction, evolution and bioethics (Biology); conservation, resource renewal, pollution “stewardship” of the earth (Earth Sciences, Social Sciences); war, racism, abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, justice (Social Studies/Ethics/Civics); Shakespeare (e.g. the Christian-Jewish conflict in the Merchant of Venice; suicide and murder in Hamlet and Macbeth) and the body of works that make up the literature of any culture (English Language Arts).

These subjects themselves are imbued with religious influences, and those who teach them have their own particular world view or religious outlook – probably shared by others in their close communities – which they will convey to their students. Since the formation of mind and character entails the transmission of values, then all schools are unavoidably teaching within a religious context.

But, whose values and whose religion? If it is not the religion of choice, then how is freedom of religion ensured as members of a community educate their children? How, as guaranteed by our Constitution, is our freedom of

religious thought not being violated **unless we have access to the means of education that provides for precisely that freedom?** If this could be accomplished simply by offering morning prayer and timetabling religion classes, then a publicly funded separate school system such as ours would likely be unjustified and indefensible. But obviously, the matter is not as simple as that.

The concerns I have raised so far address only those things within the curriculum of our schools. As we are all aware, the Catholicity of our schools does not begin or end at the classroom doors, but rather permeates almost every facet of the life of the school. This very character of our schools would most certainly disappear if only one publicly, all inclusive school system were available to parents.

To summarize then, the argument might be stated in this way:

1. The Canadian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. (Article 2a of the Charter)
2. Religion can be defined within a constitutional context as the deeply held conscientious convictions by which one leads one's life. (there is case law, ironically in the American courts, to uphold this)
3. Society compels children to attend school. (Even home-schooling must be ministry-approved.)
4. All schools embody values, and in conveying them, thus teach religion.
5. If what is taught violates or contradicts one's own religious beliefs and no equitable alternative is available, then one's freedom of religion has been denied.
6. Therefore the elimination of Catholic schools through a process such as amalgamation or consolidation would almost certainly result in an unconstitutional violation of the fundamental freedom of religion.

I think that this argument, although only sketched out here and which certainly raises other questions for discussion, carries considerable force. Try it on someone who questions the reasonableness of maintaining separate schools such as ours.

Ultimately, the responsibility of defending what a community holds dear against outside attacks must lie with the members of the community themselves. Our Catholic community makes up a substantial one-third of the province's population, and is precisely the kind of minority described in the BNA ACT as having the fundamental right to fund and run its own schools. There are those outside our community who neither cherish nor respect the notion of a Separate Catholic School System, and some who would actually cheer its demise.

To defend our community and our constitutional rights, and ultimately to ensure the transmitting of our conscientiously held convictions, our religion, to our children will require that we engage in some sound argumentative discourse, and that we do so with conviction. I hope that this has helped.

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