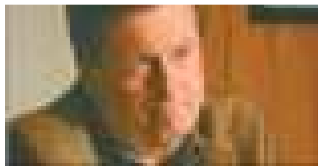


Losing FAITH

In a multicultural, secular society, publicly funded schools should be about education, not religion

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Neither John Tory's Conservatives nor Dalton McGuinty's Liberals have distinguished themselves on the issue of faith-based education. The flip-flop by Tory, left, made him look like he would turn his back on principle to buy votes. McGuinty, meanwhile, failed to explain why he thinks the separate Catholic system should continue to exist at public expense.



Janice Kennedy

True, it was back in the dark ages of the early 1960s, but the recollection might still serve. In a nutshell, this was our high school curriculum. We learned French poems and studied the correct use of the subjunctive. We read Shakespeare, Tennyson, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. We deconstructed bits of Virgil (Arma virumque cano), memorized bits of Caesar (Alea iacta est) and wrestled with mysterious bits of Latin grammar, like the Ablative Absolute. We waded through equations, pi, chemical formulas (or formulae), and the dissected inner workings of earthworms, frogs and fish. We pored over history that was ancient, medieval, Canadian and modern world.

And every so often in the schedule, one of the teachers would show up reluctantly for religion class. We all but heard the sighs as they guided us through the driest of dry dogmatic material, eagerly jumping at any excuse, it seemed to us, to be drawn off topic for extended periods. You really want to hear about my trip to Scotland last summer? OK, if you insist ☐

Yes, there were crucifixes on our classroom walls, and once in a while, the chaplain would drop by for a jolly little talk about nothing much. At major seasonal moments like Christmas or Lent, there☐d be a mass or other liturgical celebration in the auditorium, and the teachers would take their positions in the aisles, glaring meaningfully at potential troublemakers ready to erupt in giggles, pass notes or otherwise cause embarrassing disturbances.

That was life, as I recall it, for students in our faith-based high school ☐ not that ☐faith-based☐ was ever part of our vocabulary. We simply happened to go to Marymount, one of the west-end high schools run by the Montreal Catholic School Commission. It served our area of the city, and we attended MCSC schools because we were Catholic. Our non-Catholic neighbours went to West Hill or Wagar, Northmount or Montreal West, all of them PSBGM schools. That stood for ☐Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal☐ which actually educated not only Montreal☐s Protestants, but also everyone else who happened not to be Catholic.

It was a bizarre arrangement, rooted in Canada☐s constitutional foundation and the religious guarantees crafted in the distant early days when ☐Catholic☐ or ☐Protestant☐ pretty much summed up the population. In reality, both boards were public and publicly funded, though the PSBGM catchment was far more ☐public☐ than that of its counterpart. But the nominal dividing line remained faith-based, even if few MCSC or PSBGM students ever felt a particularly religious attachment to the school they attended.

Quebec began getting rid of this nonsensical and artificial system 10 years ago, decades after it had ceased to be relevant, when the provincial and federal governments agreed bilaterally to amend Section 93 of the BNA Act. Today☐s Quebec school boards are sensibly identified by their linguistic affiliation. As opposed to learning algebra as a Catholic or as a Protestant, there actually is a difference between equations puzzled out by students in English or in French.

I bring this up because it may be the last opportunity to discuss the issue that dominated at least half the Ontario election campaign before sinking John Tory and his party. Pundits for the next three decades will be scratching their heads as they try to figure out what ever possessed Tory to make faith-based school funding an issue. Divisive and entirely unnecessary, it was a guaranteed campaign breaker.

And sure enough, Tory has had to backtrack, now projecting the impression — erroneous or not — that he either never believed in what he was saying, or he'd turn his back on principle to buy votes. In politics, voter perception is everything.

Which is why the Liberal party's teflon quality on this issue is so curious. Rightly lambasting Tory's promise to fund faith-based schools as an exclusionary initiative, Dalton McGuinty and his team never once convincingly addressed the issue of the elephant in their own living room. Mumbling things about history, constitutional guarantees and not fixing what ain't broke, none of them ever adequately explained why, if they disagree with faith-based funding, they think the separate Catholic system should continue to exist at public expense. Not one.

Now, with the Tory flip-flop, the province is reverberating with enormous Liberal sighs of relief as they tuck that one away for another day.

But the horse is out of the barn. The uncomfortable question has been raised, and it may be time for an Ontario government to start dealing with it. With its public and public-separate school system, Ontario is Quebec in the days before it got smart.

In a modern, multicultural, secular society, there is no room for — and no justification for — publicly funded schools that are religiously affiliated. That includes Jewish, Islamic and non-Catholic Christian schools. And it includes all those Catholic schools, tellingly labelled — separate, — that have operated for decades in this province with tax dollars.

To be brutally honest about it, there is really very little about a Catholic school to justify its continued existence. Even back in the more dogmatic period when I went to high school, there was, I can attest, nothing especially Catholic about the poetry I memorized, the Latin grammar I absorbed, the history I studied, the science and algebra I struggled with.

The teachers were like teachers anywhere. And while they were all officially Catholic (especially the nuns), their beliefs and religious practice entered into precisely zero per cent of their teaching — except, of course, if they taught religion. When you listened carefully, you realized that some were not only non-practising Catholics but also agnostics — which had nothing to do with their skill in the classroom.

This I knew as a student. As a teacher for 18 years in four different Montreal-area Catholic high schools, I saw the reality even more clearly. People had to show baptismal certificates to be hired by the Catholic board, but their personal lives were a different matter, filled with things on which Rome would definitely have frowned. Many never went to church. A number were divorced and remarried. One personable fellow had an unusual sexual peccadillo (at least I hope it was unusual). Occasionally you'd hear of some married person on staff carrying on with another married person on staff. There were teachers with booze and drug problems. Just another workplace, in other words. There were also significant numbers of fine, ethical teachers who were either indifferent to religion, or privately believed it to be the root of all evil.

And any one of these nominal Catholics could get a religion class dumped on to his or her schedule in September (here you go ☐ four Grade 11 math, one Grade 9 science and one Grade 10 religion), no matter how horrifying the idea or how ill-prepared the teacher.

People being people, I can't imagine that things are much different in Ontario.

Although it may not be evident to those who have not studied or taught in separate schools, the truth is that there is very little Catholic about Catholic schools ☐ certainly too little to justify separate funding and their apparently exclusionary aura. That's a good thing. Publicly funded schools should be about education in the broadest sense, and our Catholic schools do a fine job of being about that.

So why keep up the pretence? In the same way that we don't need Protestant, Islamic or Jewish publicly funded schools, we don't need Catholic ones.

It is time to face contemporary realities and reorganize. Schools of the present separate boards should be merged into the existing public framework, with no reduction of facilities, services or jobs. Teachers with Catholic boards would simply keep on doing what they've always done, minus the artificial designation.

Religious education ☐ which no one is saying is unimportant ☐ could be scheduled into the curriculum as a choice reflecting whatever faiths the numbers warrant, or else a non-religious ☐moral formation☐ class.

There would be a chorus of predictable howling from Catholic school board officials ☐ who wants to lose a fiefdom? ☐ but the rallying cry for ☐Catholic education☐ is a hollow one. An awful lot of Catholic teachers and students would acknowledge that.

In this country and this province, we are not insulated from the global temper of the times. The disparate frictions simmering dangerously within our larger community are already threatening to boil over. God knows we have enough distinct identities to keep us separate from, and suspicious of, one another. Now is not the time to build new walls.

But it may be the time to start tearing down some of the old ones.