

# CATHOLICISM, SECULARISM, AND THE PARENT REPORT

Reviewing 400 years of schooling in Québec, Jean Plante starts by acknowledging Québec's adoption of French educational models<sup>1</sup> during the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>2</sup> The final third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the apex of "Catholicism as the first and most fundamental element of the French-Canadian nationality."<sup>3</sup> A "discussion over the primacy" of Catholicism "over civil society" came to preoccupy Québec, including its influence in the "education domain," where the Church had sought to consolidate its influence.<sup>4</sup> At the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "education was the business of the Church."<sup>5</sup> Between 1900 and 1924, for example, the authors of pedagogical manuals rationalized their authority by "invoking divine will, the providential mission of the educator and the authority of the clergy."<sup>6</sup> During this first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cultivation of superior minds was the main point of Québec education, its realization requiring submission to the "providential order as a fundamental principle enabling the unification of the human personality."<sup>7</sup> In the curriculum, the study of "religion" was central.<sup>8</sup>

During the school year of 1929-1930, Adrien Pouliot defended "scientific culture" in an article in the journal *L'Enseignement Secondaire*, noting that university science professors were complaining concerning the students' lack of scientific training.<sup>9</sup> What science instruction there was did not follow university science curriculum; moreover, too few students considered scientific careers.<sup>10</sup> While he acknowledged the "dangers" to "traditional values" that were "inherent in the teaching of the sciences."<sup>11</sup> Plante suggests that "Pouliot's alarm cry regarding the inferiority of our scientific culture provoked a new definition of general culture," a development aggravated by the economic crisis of 1929-1930.<sup>12</sup> The aim of secondary education became "not only the intellectual and moral education of the individual but also the training of the future ruling class alert to the needs of the nation."<sup>13</sup> At this time, Plante points out, nationalism contained "religious content, but religion was no longer "the sole justification" for curriculum content.<sup>14</sup>

World War II marked the beginning of a new curricular orientation in Québec secondary education, as the "aristocratic"<sup>15</sup> endorsement of the classics and the humanism associated with their study was tempered by secular and specifically scientific elements; by the 1950s, humanism reflected this new curricular consensus. Culture became anthropological as well as aesthetic, denoting both "the legacy of the past and an opening onto the international," an "internationalism" combining "progress and tradition."<sup>16</sup> History became a curricular lightning-rod, as the Church wanted the study of history to "give a moral meaning of the past, while the new

humanism wanted to give ... the student understanding of the society in which he/she will live.”<sup>17</sup>

Since the 1960s, Plante suggests that the Parent Commission<sup>18</sup> has guided Québec school reform, with its goals of (1) providing everyone access to education, (2) adapting schooling to student “aptitudes and tastes,” and (3) preparing individuals for living in society.<sup>19</sup> In 1961, the liberal government of M. Lesage created a royal commission to report on Québec’s educational system, including the organization and financing of education but also making recommendations regarding the improvement of schooling and instruction.<sup>20</sup> The Ministry of Education asked (1) what “common disciplines” are to be taught to all, (2) when these should be taught, (3) what concentrations can be chosen by students and how long these should be studied, and (4) what and for how long should electives be offered.<sup>21</sup> Curriculum content – for each subject taught – was to be approved by the Catholic or Protestant Committee of the Superior Council of Education, then transmitted by the Ministry to the School Boards who were to “organize the content of each discipline in relation to their organizational constraints.”<sup>22</sup> Plante adds: “At the level of the school, it is the teachers who elaborate the study plans for each discipline, according to the context and needs.”<sup>23</sup>

In order to promote a “humanistic” and “pragmatic culture,” to prepare students to find their place in society, and to encourage “social awareness” (“mutual respect, a spirit of collaboration to the benefit of the collectivity”), the Ministry resolved to organize curriculum development attuned to student development, attentive to “the diversity of their aptitudes and their living conditions,” mindful that all youth “will have a role to play in society, as citizens and as workers.”<sup>24</sup> To achieve these objectives, the Ministry proposed the notion of “framework programs,” instituting “certain milestones to ... insure a good functioning of schools.”<sup>25</sup> These were presented to Québec teachers in a process of “consultation,” allowing for “modifications” if needed; this phase was followed by implementation of the new program “in some regions, classes or pilot schools”: if these experiments met objections, “final corrections” would be made and then the curriculum would be installed throughout Québec schools.<sup>26</sup> In order to provide curricular coherence, each school board would work from the Ministry’s “content-grid,” determining the content of each course, including “the precise and final objectives” of each course, what “knowledge” and “skills” were to be considered minimal, and “even impose a particular method” of instruction (although school boards could be “more permissive and, simply provide a list of various possible choices”), and “impose an evaluation mode in each school.”<sup>27</sup> Despite what seems like ever-expanding efforts at control, Plant concludes:

A call to life! This could be the moto of each of the schools in Québec. That the school be more open and thus more humanist is the current challenge. [...] These two objectives from the Ministry of Education (a more open school, a more humane school) signify that the school system ... is now ready to fulfill

its duty to be in service of humanity. This is a challenge, no doubt, but we must all seek to meet it promptly while our schools are still almost full.<sup>28</sup>

Marie-France Bérard – the research assistant for Québec – judged that there is here “too little analysis and/or unpacking of the Ministry’s enactment of the recommendations of the Parent Commission”; she suggested that more detailed and analytic articles were to follow.<sup>29</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

Jean Plante starts by acknowledging Québec’s adoption of French educational models during the 17th and 18th centuries, one that came to be contested during the early 20th century when Adrien Pouliot defended “scientific culture,” foreshadowing a shift in curricular emphasis that became evident by the 1950s and was consolidated by the Parent Report. Interesting to learn that the study of “history” was embraced both by Catholics and (secular) humanists (if for different reasons), then later by nationalists who saw it as key to forming Québécois identity.<sup>30</sup> Plante endorses the Parent Report as a “call to life.” My question is: to what “life” were students and teachers being called? Has it become a virtual one, as technologization decrees?<sup>31</sup> Can there be educational experience without the abrasiveness of actual – embodied – experience?<sup>32</sup>

## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> See research brief #26.
- <sup>2</sup> Plante 1979, 27.
- <sup>3</sup> Plante 1979, 28.
- <sup>4</sup> Plante 1979, 28.
- <sup>5</sup> Plante 1979, 28.
- <sup>6</sup> Plante 1979, 29.
- <sup>7</sup> Plante 1979, 29.
- <sup>8</sup> Plante 1979, 29.
- <sup>9</sup> Plante 1979, 29.
- <sup>10</sup> Plante 1979, 29. The same concern – combined with Cold War politics - animated curriculum reform in the United States during the 1960s, and in the decades following (Pinar 2019a, 45, 110).
- <sup>11</sup> Plante 1979, 29.
- <sup>12</sup> Plante 1979, 30.
- <sup>13</sup> Plante 1979, 30.
- <sup>14</sup> Plante 1979, 30.
- <sup>15</sup> Plante 1979, 30.
- <sup>16</sup> Plante 1979, 30.
- <sup>17</sup> Plante 1979, 30.
- <sup>18</sup> See also research brief #24.
- <sup>19</sup> Plante 1979, 31.
- <sup>20</sup> Plante 1979, 32.
- <sup>21</sup> Plante 1979, 32.
- <sup>22</sup> Plante 1979, 32.
- <sup>23</sup> Plante 1979, 33.
- <sup>24</sup> Plante 1979, 35-36.
- <sup>25</sup> Plante 1979, 36.
- <sup>26</sup> Plante 1979, 36.
- <sup>27</sup> Plante 1979, 36-37.
- <sup>28</sup> Plante 1979, 37.
- <sup>29</sup> Bérard to Pinar. Personal communication, July 30, 2019. In addition to research brief #24, see also #22 and #29
- <sup>30</sup> See research briefs #20 and #21.
- <sup>31</sup> I answer no: Pinar 2019b.
- <sup>32</sup> I answer no: Pinar 2015.